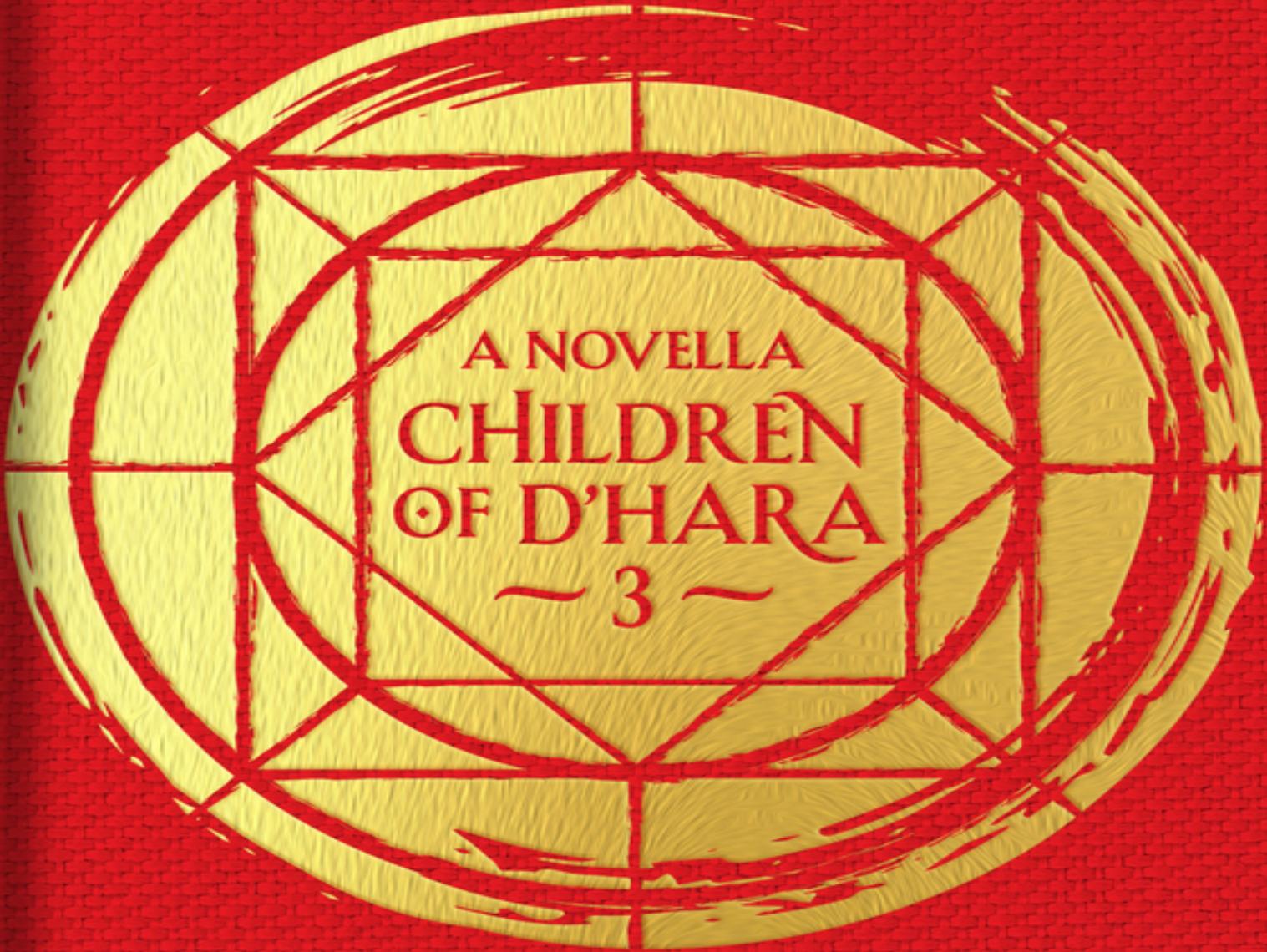


TERRY
GOODKIND



A NOVELLA
CHILDREN
OF D'HARA
— 3 —

WASTELAND

WASTELAND

BY TERRY GOODKIND

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TERRY
GOODKIND

WASTELAND

A Children of D'Hara Novella

Episode 3

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WASTELAND

1

“You have to get to the Keep,” Kahlan told Richard, fighting to get the words out past the lump in her throat. “Hurry. I’ll be all right. Take the sliph and go.”

Richard hadn’t said a word. He seemed frozen in place, standing there on the top of the stone wall around the sliph.

“I’m sorry you can’t travel in me, too, Mother Confessor,” the sliph said in her silken voice while showing a smooth, silvery smile, “but you and your babies would die in me.”

Kahlan thought the sliph sounded a bit too satisfied that Kahlan couldn’t travel with Richard.

The Golden Goddess wanted to end Richard and Kahlan’s line of magic. She would do anything to kill them both, but she would be especially ferocious about killing their children should they have any. Those children were more than Kahlan’s longtime wish; they were a promise of a future with magic to protect their world.

Kahlan struggled to hold back tears of crushing disappointment that she couldn’t travel in the sliph and get to the Wizard’s Keep. The Keep was a place of safety. Besides the Sisters of the Light and other gifted people there, the Keep itself had powerful shields. The massive Wizard’s Keep was designed to protect the First Wizard, and by extension his loved ones and children. They felt sure they would be safe there from the Golden Goddess and the Glee. Richard and Kahlan’s children would be safe there to live and grow, to run through the halls, laughing, as Kahlan had done as a little girl, while Richard found a way to put an end to the threat from the goddess and her kind.

But because she was pregnant, Kahlan couldn’t travel in the sliph. The Keep suddenly seemed very, very far away.

“I will take Lord Rahl,” the sliph cooed. She circled a quicksilver arm around Richard’s waist as he stood as if paralyzed on the stone wall of her well, staring down at Kahlan. “As you say, Mother Confessor, you can remain behind while I take him to the Keep.”

Unable to stand the tension under Richard’s penetrating gaze, Kahlan yelled, “Go!”

Despite her best efforts, tears were beginning to well up in her eyes. She knew she wouldn’t be able to hold them back for much longer. She wanted him to leave before she lost control of her emotions.

Shale looked from Kahlan back to Richard. “I will protect her, Lord Rahl, while you go get help.”

“We will protect her too,” Cassia said as she nodded her agreement with Shale. She stepped closer to Kahlan. “With our lives.”

Vika, standing on the wall next to Richard, said, “I will go with Lord Rahl and protect him.”

Vika looked over at him, uncertain if she should jump into the roiling silver waters of the sliph ahead of him, or wait.

Kahlan’s lower lip began to quiver. “Go and get help, Richard, would you, please? I’ll have your sword. I know how to use it and it has served me well in your absence in the past. I’ll have plenty of protection. I’ll be fine until you can get back to me.”

Richard finally pulled away from the silver arm the sliph had around him. When he did, it shrank back, seeming to melt down into the pool and become part of what looked like nothing so much as liquid silver sloshing in the well. The glossy silver face, which reflected the room around it, showed no emotion.

Free of the sliph’s arm, Richard hopped down off the short stone wall and walked across the room, his raptor gaze seeing no one but her. Kahlan

couldn't stop trembling. Dreading what he might say, she involuntarily backed away a step.

When Richard reached her, he softly enclosed her in his strong arms and then pulled her tight to him. She could no longer hold back the tears as she buried her face against him.

"I'm sorry, Richard," she blurted out. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I couldn't, not in the middle of—"

Richard pressed her head to his shoulder. "Hush now. No need to cry about something so wonderful."

"But—"

"I'm not leaving you for anything."

"But you must get to the Keep."

"We'll figure something out. I'm not leaving you, not at a time like this."

"I didn't want to tell you. You need to be able to protect us. I didn't want to burden you with this on top of everything else. I didn't want it to be a distraction."

Richard let out a soft laugh as he briefly hugged her tighter. "It's not a distraction, Kahlan. It's motivation." He pulled back, holding her by her arms as he looked in her eyes. "The sliph said babies. Not baby. Babies."

Kahlan nodded. "I'm pregnant with twins."

Richard's eyebrows lifted a little in surprise. His smile warmed her heart and, in that instant, dispelled all her terror and fear. She suddenly felt the full joy of it again.

"A boy and a girl," Shale said.

He turned a serious frown on her. "You knew?"

Kahlan put a finger against his jaw and turned his face back to her. “I made her swear that she wouldn’t tell you. I guess I made the same mistake the goddess made up in the library.”

His smile returned as he gazed into her eyes again. “What mistake is that?”

“I underestimated you.”

His smile widened at that.

Kahlan grew sober. “But Richard, you still need to get to the Keep. You can’t stay here if you hope to stop the goddess. That’s what matters. There are gifted there who may be able to help. The Sisters of the Light are there. Maybe you could make a quick trip there in the sliph and bring back some of the Sisters.”

“You are what matters,” he said softly as he gently pulled Kahlan back into his arms.

She buried her face against him, now with tears of relief and joy.

“This is what we have been fighting for since we first met in the Hartland woods,” he told her. “For life, for the right of life to continue. And then for our right to continue, for our own happiness.”

Holding on tightly to him, Kahlan had never loved him more.

She should have known.

2

“What do you wish to do, Lord Rahl?” Vika asked.

He finally drew back from Kahlan. “What my grandfather would have said to do, of course.”

Vika pulled her single long blond braid forward over her shoulder and held it in her fist as she looked down at him. Finally, she hopped down off the short stone wall.

“I don’t understand, Lord Rahl.”

“Zedd, my grandfather, always said to think of the solution, not the problem. The problem is that Kahlan can’t travel in the sliph. We’re focused on that problem.”

“I didn’t know your grandfather.” Vika looked at a loss. “I’m sorry, Lord Rahl, but I don’t know what that means.”

“It means that instead of thinking of the problem—that the sliph can’t take us all—we instead need to think of the solution. I’m hoping we will be safe at the Keep—Kahlan especially—so we need to get there. If the problem is that she can’t go in the sliph, the solution is that we have to get there another way.”

Vika brightened. “I will get horses and supplies together.”

Richard smiled at her. “Good thinking, Vika. That is the solution.”

Shale stepped closer. “Lord Rahl, won’t that be dangerous? Traveling all the way there? I’m from the Northern Waste, which has enough of its own dangers, but I’ve heard very ugly things about many of the places down here. I’ve heard that D’Hara is dangerous enough in its own right, but the Midlands is a savage and wild place and traveling across it can be quite perilous.”

Kahlan knew the truth of that. When she used to travel the Midlands, she always had Giller, an experienced wizard, with her at all times for protection. Richard was a wizard, of course, and more powerful than Giller had ever been, but Giller did have the advantage of having been trained his whole life in the use of his craft and in the dangers of the Midlands.

Richard had been raised in Westland, far away from any knowledge of magic, and the gift didn't work the same way in him as it did in others. Unlike a typical gifted person, he couldn't necessarily call upon his ability at will—both because of his lack of a lifetime of training and because his gift was fundamentally different. Being the gift of a war wizard, his power came forth mostly as a function of rage.

"I can testify to the fact that the Midlands is indeed dangerous," Kahlan said. "But it's also a place of beauty and wonder."

Shale shot her a cynical look. "Beauty won't save us. The key word in what you said is 'dangerous.' We would have to cross a lot of dangerous territory."

"Well, it's obviously dangerous for us to stay in the People's Palace," Richard told the sorceress. "We will be under constant threat and unrelenting attack as long as we're here. Here, the goddess can keep an eye on us, so to speak, through everyone in the palace without the gift. That's pretty much everyone. She can watch us and pick a time to attack when we are at our weakest. We can never have a moment of safety, here."

"There are gifted at the Keep who may be able to help us, and perhaps more importantly, the Keep has numerous powerful shields of every kind that can protect Kahlan and the babies. There are some shields here at the People's Palace, but not nearly enough. It simply isn't safe for us here. We need to get to a place of safety so we can figure out how to combat this threat. That place is the Wizard's Keep in Aydindril. We can't go in the sliph, so we either walk or go on horseback. There is no other way. It's as simple as that."

Shale crossed her arms as she considered his words for a moment, visibly cooling as she did so. “You’re right. We’re not safe here. I can’t offer any better suggestion.”

Berdine scowled at him with fury in her blue eyes. “Well, I’m going, too. I’ll not be left behind this time. I’m going.”

Richard turned a smile to the concern that was so obvious in her expression. “Of course you’re going. I wouldn’t think of going without you, Berdine. We’re all going.”

“I’ll organize a detachment of the First File to escort us,” Cassia offered. “How many soldiers do you wish to take with us?”

With one arm around Kahlan’s waist, Richard took in all the tense faces watching him. “None. We can’t risk it.”

Cassia leaned in as if she hadn’t heard him correctly. “Can’t risk it? Can’t risk having protection? It’s a long way across a lot of dangerous territory. A unit of cavalry and soldiers of the First File would act as a deterrent to those dangers. A show of force would prevent a fight from happening in the first place. The last thing we want is a fight. You or the Mother Confessor could be hurt or even killed in a fight. Why wouldn’t you want to take adequate protection?”

“Because the goddess has the ability to use soldiers to spy on us, just the same as she can use anyone else. If she knows precisely where we are, she can send the Glee to attack us out in the open in the Midlands. Worse, just as she used Nolo to try to stab Kahlan to death when he was alone with her, the goddess could use one of those men to attack us when we least expect it. Whereas Nolo was rather inept with a knife, the soldiers of the First File are experts with their weapons. Those soldiers wouldn’t be protecting our backs, they would be a threat when our backs are turned.

“The Golden Goddess only has to be successful once and Kahlan is dead. The goddess will then have accomplished her objective of destroying the

chances of our magic living on. That would ensure the eventual extinction of everyone in this world.”

“He’s right,” Kahlan said, the strength finally coming back to her now that Richard knew she was pregnant and was determined to protect her and the twins. More importantly, it was also clear from his reasoning that her pregnancy wasn’t going to be the distraction she had feared. “It’s not a matter of their loyalty. We know beyond any doubt that they are loyal. It’s a matter of the ability of the goddess to bend them to her will and use them.”

Richard turned back to the sliph. Her smooth silver face was still watching him, and the shiny surface of that face reflected the people watching both of them.

“Sliph, you may go back into your sleep. Thank you for coming.”

“Even if the Mother Confessor can’t travel, I can still take you to the Keep, Lord Rahl. Come, we will travel. You will be pleased.”

“I would like that very much, but I can’t leave Kahlan. I must stay to protect her. Since I can’t have the pleasure of traveling in you, you may go back into your sleep until the day when I can travel in you.”

Kahlan knew that Richard understood the unique nature of the sliph. He knew how to talk to her in a way that she not only understood but he could put it in a way that didn’t lose her trust. Kahlan just didn’t like the nature of the necessary flattery.

“Thank you, Master. I’m sorry you won’t be traveling in me. You would have been pleased.”

“Yes, I know I would have,” he said. “I hope to one day soon have the pleasure of traveling in you. Until then, you may go back to be with your soul.”

The silver face smiled. “Thank you, Master.”

With that, the shiny silver face seemed to melt back down into the ever-moving liquid silver filling the well, and then the entire mass of her swiftly sank out of sight with accelerating speed.

Shale planted her fists on her hips. “Someday you are going to have to explain that to me.”

“If you like,” he said, “but I can tell you right now you will not be any more pleased to know the story.”

When she let her arms fall back to her sides, Richard gestured around at all the women watching him. “From now on, the only ones we can trust are the nine of us. We all have magic that prevents the Golden Goddess from getting into our minds or seeing through our eyes.”

“Do you really think that if we took soldiers who are loyal to you,” Shale pressed, “that the goddess could actually use them?”

Richard shrugged. “Maybe not, but are you willing to risk it?”

“Are you willing to risk danger to the Mother Confessor by traveling dangerous lands?” the sorceress asked.

Richard frowned at her. “So then, you relied on soldiers for your protection in the dangerous Northern Waste?”

“No. I relied only on myself.” Shale sighed when she realized what he had just done. “I see your point.”

“You told me when we first met that when you were meditating you could feel some strange entity probing, trying to get into your mind, but it couldn’t. Remember?”

“Yes.”

“That had to be the goddess. Your gift protected you and she couldn’t get in. None of the soldiers have the benefit of that protection. We in this room

are the only ones we can trust to be free of the goddess's control."

Richard finally retrieved his sword from where he had left it leaning against the stone wall of the well. He slipped the baldric back over his head before attaching the scabbard at his left hip. He looked at each of them in turn. "Until we get to the Keep and the gifted there who may be able to help, it must be us nine against everyone else because everyone else is a potential threat."

Vika turned a sly smile to her sister Mord-Sith. "We are Mord-Sith. We have no desire to babysit soldiers, anyway." She turned back to Richard. "Unless you think it best to travel on foot, we are going to need to get horses. That's not a problem at the palace."

"Except that Lieutenant Dolan and the First File know we're leaving the palace," Richard said, "so they will likely assume we're leaving on horseback. That means we have to assume the goddess knows that as well and will be watching for it. But she won't know which direction we go unless the soldiers see us leaving. It would obviously be easier and quicker getting to the Keep if we had horses, but taking them would mean that soldiers would by necessity see us collecting them. Any number of the First File standing watch on the high ramparts would easily spot us leaving on horseback and know which way we went."

Kahlan's concern was evident in her expression. "That means the goddess could see all of that through any of their eyes."

Richard agreed with a nod. "Getting away on horses without being seen is a problem."

"Then stop thinking of the problem, and think instead of the solution," Shale said.

"What would the solution be, then?" Richard asked her.

Shale leaned toward him. "Think. Who do you have with you on this journey?"

The way the sorceress asked the question reminded him of so many gifted people who had taught him valuable lessons.

Richard shrugged, not sure what she meant. “We have the nine of us. Kahlan, me, six Mord-Sith—”

Shale flashed him a cunning smile. “And me.”

3

The stables were partway across the sprawling city-palace. Once they had horses, then Shale would need to do her part, but before they reached the stables they needed to avoid being seen by people throughout the palace. Being spotted would expose them to the risk that the goddess could also see them and send Glee to attack.

To keep out of sight after leaving the room with the sliph's well, the nine of them had to make their way through a labyrinth of underground passageways and tunnels that few people other than the Mord-Sith knew about or used, then climb iron ladders in ventilation shafts and a series of ancient, rusty, iron spiral service stairs. They managed to remain unseen the entire journey through the rarely used areas of the palace.

Nyda, in the lead, brought the party to a halt when she reached a small metal access door. She carefully pulled it open just enough to peek out. Once satisfied it was safe, she pulled open the door, letting short, wavy-haired Berdine go through first. The tall, blond Nyda went next. When Richard poked his head through, he saw that they were behind some of the storage buildings. Beyond was a staging area and then a number of buildings with stables. The buildings had roofs to protect them from the open sky above, which revealed fading daylight. The first of the strange, new stars in that sky were just beginning to appear.

Not far away, between the dark shape of the buildings to each side of them, was a large manure pile waiting for eventual use in the many gardens throughout the palace grounds. Besides the food transported in by vendors who brought it up the internal passage, the gardens and greenhouses in the palace were an abundant source of fresh food to feed all the people living in the palace. The manure fed those crops.

That large manure pile served to hide the nine of them, but because of the stink it wasn't a pleasant place to hide. Richard reminded himself that it

wasn't nearly as bad as the horrific stench of the remains deep down in the foundation area.

"Something smells funny," Shale said.

Richard turned to her with an incredulous look. "Maybe it has something to do with this big pile of manure right in front of us?"

As Shale leaned out to peer into the distance, the sarcasm didn't seem to register with her. "No. It's something else," she murmured, half to herself.

"Like what?" he asked.

The sorceress's attention finally returned to him. She shook her head unhappily. "I'm not sure. It's not something I've exactly smelled before, but for some reason I feel like I should know what it is."

Richard realized she was serious, but it didn't make any sense and he didn't want to take the time to discuss the unknowable. Instead, he advanced in a crouch and then leaned out from behind a manure cart to survey the area. He wanted them to be able to get out of the palace and on their way to the Wizard's Keep without being seen. Anyone who saw them meant that it was possible the goddess could see them, too. If they could get away cleanly, then the journey to the protection of the Keep's shields and gifted would be that much less hazardous.

In the distance Richard saw soldiers on horseback just returning from patrol, likely around the base of the plateau. Horses were also occasionally used in the palace's special passageways meant for mounted soldiers, enabling them to quickly get to distant areas or trouble spots. Sometimes they used ramps up through the inside of the plateau that were also used exclusively by troops. Less commonly they used the narrow road that wound around the outside of the plateau.

That was the road they were going to need to use to get down to the Azrith Plain. One of the problems with that was that there was a drawbridge with soldiers stationed at it. Richard was trusting that Shale had some witch

woman's trick to make those soldiers think they were someone else, or even not see them at all. He didn't care what she did, only that it worked.

Vika pointed at stable workers taking the horses as the tired soldiers dismounted. "Over that way, where the man is lighting the lamps on the outside wall of the stables, is one of the buildings where the fresh horses are kept for men to take out on patrol."

Kahlan rested a hand on the hilt of the knife sheathed at her belt as she came up in a crouch close to Richard and Vika. As beautiful as Richard thought she looked in the singular dress of the Mother Confessor, she looked just as good to him in her traveling clothes with a knife sheathed at her side. Some of her long hair fell forward over her shoulder as she carefully leaned out to take a look.

"How many fresh horses do you think are in there?" she asked. "Do you think there are enough?"

Vika looked a little surprised by the question. "There are a lot of stables all throughout this one area. There are hundreds and hundreds of horses. I'm not sure of the exact number. With as many horses as I've seen here and other areas combined while living and working at the palace under Darken Rahl's rule there might even be thousands."

Richard was jarred by her saying "while living and working at the palace under Darken Rahl's rule." Before Richard defeated Darken Rahl, as under the tyrants of the House of Rahl before him, the work of a Mord-Sith living at the People's Palace was the work of torturing people for information or simply because the Lord Rahl wanted them tortured to death as punishment. The Mord-Sith were experts at keeping their captives on the cusp between life and death for prolonged periods of time to extend their agony.

The Mord-Sith didn't come by that work easily. They themselves were taken captive as young women and broken through years of the same kind of torture they learned to use on others. They became the chattel of evil men —property, weapons those men used for their own ends.

That training eventually drove those women to madness. Richard had once been the captive of an especially ruthless Mord-Sith, Denna, who had introduced him into that hopeless, surreal world of madness.

Vika's words had brought all those unwelcome memories unexpectedly flooding back to him. As he had done so often, Richard forced those memories from his mind.

"Vika is right," Berdine said as she snuck up closer behind them. "The palace must have at least a thousand horses in all. For all I know, it's possible the true number is twice that. And that's only counting the horses belonging to the First File."

"Then they shouldn't miss the dozen and a half we'll need," Shale said as she and the rest of the impatient Mord-Sith, ducking low, joined Richard.

Berdine gave her a reproachful look. "You think cavalrymen don't know every horse? Know how many there are, and which stables house them? They live with those horses. Many sleep in barracks at the rear of the stables so as to be at hand should they be needed on a moment's notice. They would miss one set of reins, to say nothing of a saddle. One missing horse would be noticed immediately."

"We aren't out to steal them," Richard said. "We merely need you to collect what we need. The stables provide horses and supplies to the Lord Rahl all the time. That's what you are doing this time as well. It's nothing unusual."

Vika nodded. "I got the horses for you the last time, remember?"

"When we went down to see Nolo's people," he said as he turned back to watch the stablehands leading the horses into the stables to unsaddle, water, and feed them.

Vika nodded. "That's right. I've been to the stables many times before. The soldiers and workers aren't going to dare to ask a Mord-Sith why she wants a dozen and a half horses and supplies. I've been here a number of times and they know it's always on orders from Lord Rahl. Not you, Lord Rahl—

your father. That Lord Rahl. Anyway, they won't give a second thought to my request for horses and supplies."

"That hardly seems like the secrecy we need," Kahlan said. "The whole point is that we don't want the goddess to know that we're collecting horses, otherwise she will be watching to see where we are headed. If these men know, then it's possible if not probable she would know as well."

Shale gestured dismissively. "Leave that to me."

Richard looked over at her. "What can you do?"

"She's a witch woman," Kahlan reminded him in a low voice so that the stablehands wouldn't hear her.

Richard turned his frown toward her. "What does that have to do with it?"

Kahlan put a hand on the side of his shoulder. "Witch women are masters of illusion, remember? People see what a witch woman wants them to see. Red appeared beautiful and young to me, much like Shale, but she appeared to others as an elderly woman."

When Richard looked back over his shoulder at Shale, she showed him a sly smile. "Let me worry about the solution to this problem."

Richard realized that he knew what Kahlan meant. Witch women could make you see what they wanted you to see. More than once Shota had appeared to him as his mother. He knew what Shota looked like, or at least how she presented herself to him when she wasn't creating the illusion that she was his mother. But he couldn't be entirely sure if that was her real appearance or not. He suspected that the same thing was true of Shale.

"All right," he said to Vika. "Why don't you go and tell the stable master that you need a dozen and a half horses, with saddles for nine of them. And supplies. We will need traveling supplies—food, water, sleeping gear. He doesn't need to know who it's all for. Let him assume what he will. Have them hitched over there at that staging area. Once he gets what we need, we

will let Shale do her part so we can collect the horses and leave. The sooner the better, so be quick about it.”

Vika gave him the kind of smooth, confident smile that few people other than a Mord-Sith could do so well. “No problem. Wait here. I’ll be back as soon as I arrange it.”

4

Shale leaned in impatiently. “What could be taking her so long?”

Richard let out a frustrated sigh. “I can’t imagine. They should have been able to have the horses saddled and the supplies ready long ago.”

“Could the soldiers or stable workers be giving her any grief?” Kahlan asked.

Richard turned an incredulous look on her. “A Mord-Sith. Give a Mord-Sith grief.”

Kahlan let out an exasperated sigh. “I guess that was kind of a silly question.”

It had long since grown dark. For a time, the stars had been out, but as they waited clouds had rolled in. It was starting to smell like rain was on the way.

Richard leaned out a little, scanning the area, but he still couldn’t see Vika anywhere. What was just as troubling, he couldn’t see any sign that the stable workers were hurrying to carry out her instructions. He had long ago expected to see the freshly saddled horses brought out to the staging area while the supplies were collected and loaded.

Vika had walked over to the buildings, around the corner of one of them, and that was the last they saw of her.

“Maybe they’re having trouble getting supplies together,” Kahlan suggested. “Maybe they had to send someone down to the storehouses to get the kind of traveling food we need.”

Richard nodded as he watched the entire area, looking for any sign of Vika. “I suppose that could be the case. It could be that the kind of supplies she

asked for have to be collected from a distant storehouse. But still, I can't imagine Vika not coming back and telling us what the delay was all about."

"Well, maybe she slipped and fell and hit her head or something," Shale whispered. "Maybe she's hurt and needs help."

Richard bit his lower lip as he considered. The same thought had occurred to him as well, but he hadn't heard anything. It seemed like if she had fallen, then in the quiet of the night they would have heard her calling out, or something. Besides that, there were a few stable workers occasionally coming and going from all the buildings. If she had fallen, it seemed like one of them would have seen her on the ground. A Mord-Sith in red leather would be hard to miss. Although, it had grown dark ...

An impatient Berdine leaned close. "Lord Rahl, it couldn't possibly have taken this long. This doesn't make sense. She could have had a hundred horses saddled and out here by now."

"More than that," Kahlan added, "there hasn't been any sign that the stable staff are seeing to her orders. They all seem to be calmly going about their other work. No one is rushing to take care of the things she would have asked for. Surely men would have come running when a Mord-Sith demanded horses to be saddled. Besides that, we would have seen other people rushing off to get supplies. No one is rushing anywhere."

"You're all right." Richard scratched his eyebrow as he considered what to do. "Something is wrong, I can feel it. I need to find out what's going on."

He abruptly stood up. His feet were numb from squatting down for so long. He rotated each ankle in turn to get the blood started back into his feet as he looked around. All five of the Mord-Sith stood up with him. He turned to Kahlan and Shale, still crouched down behind the manure wagon.

"Berdine, you come with me. Shale, Rikka, Nyda, Cassia, Vale—in case there is some kind of trouble please stay close to Kahlan for now. For all we know, one of the Glee could have snatched her. It shouldn't take long to find out what's going on."

The four Mord-Sith squatted back down near Kahlan. If there was any kind of trouble, he knew that in a heartbeat they would all bring their Agiel up into a fist and at the ready to defend her.

Richard gestured. “Come on, Berdine. It all looks peaceful enough, so something is obviously wrong. Keep a sharp lookout for anything that doesn’t look right to you. Be ready for one of those hateful things to pop out of nowhere.”

Berdine nodded and then fell in beside him after he went around the manure cart and started across the open stable area. The aroma of haystacks near each building was a pleasant change from the smell of manure. They hadn’t gone far when some of the men saw them. They all abruptly changed course from what they were doing and rushed over to Richard and Berdine.

“Lord Rahl!” one of them called back into the quiet night in case any of the other workers hadn’t seen him. “It’s Lord Rahl!”

So much for stealth, Richard thought. Men who had heard the call ran out of buildings. In short order there were fifteen or twenty men gathered around and more in the distance were coming.

“What can we do for you, Lord Rahl?” an older man with a flat cloth hat asked. “Do you wish some horses saddled and brought out?”

“Actually,” he said, still looking around for any sign of her, “I sent a Mord-Sith to do just that quite a while ago. Her name is Vika. Why didn’t you get the horses for her?”

The men all shared puzzled looks.

The older man pulled off his cap and smoothed back his thin crop of gray hair. “A Mord-Sith?” He frowned as he gestured at Berdine. “This would be the first of those ladies we’ve seen all night, Lord Rahl.” He turned one way, then the other, looking around at his men. “Anyone see the Mord-Sith?”

The men all shook their heads, mumbling that they hadn't.

Richard gestured. "I thought I saw her go that way, by that building. Would some of you take a look, please, and make sure she didn't fall and hurt herself or something."

"Stranger things have happened," the older man confirmed.

Men ran off to do Richard's bidding. He saw some of them trot off to go between the buildings, checking where he said he had last seen her. It wasn't long before they all straggled by, looking disappointed and shaking their heads. They all reported that they had found nothing.

Richard put his hands on his hips as he looked around. It didn't make any sense. Vika couldn't have vanished into thin air. A frightening thought that had been in the back of his mind was beginning to seem like the most likely explanation. Could it be that one of the Glee had snatched her and taken her back to the goddess? That seemed far-fetched, especially since he didn't even know if that was possible. Finally, he had an idea.

"I need something to see with," he said to the gathered men. "Bring me a torch or lantern, please."

"We try not to have torches around the horses and all the hay," the gray-haired man said as he replaced his hat on his head. "We have plenty of lanterns, though."

When he gestured the order, one of the men rushed to retrieve a lantern. He pulled one off a hook on the corner of the closest building and rushed back to hand it to Richard.

"Thanks. You can all go back to what you were doing. I'll take it from here."

Lantern in hand, Richard marched off to have a look for himself. Berdine followed close on his heels.

Going around the building where he had last seen Vika, Richard started searching the soft ground looking for any sign. In the shadows between the buildings, and with the clouds, it was quite dark, but the lantern gave him enough light to see what he needed to see. There were a lot of footprints. Most of those prints were older, while a few were from the men who had just checked for Richard, looking for Vika.

Before long, the confusion of prints sorted themselves out in his mind and Richard found what he was looking for: prints from Vika's boots. He recognized the size and the shape. None of the prints from the men's boots looked similar. Had there been more light, he would have been able to also recognize Vika's unique gait from the angle and depth of the impressions made by her boots, along with her height and weight.

He followed her footprints between the buildings to the end where she had turned behind the building to Richard's left. He also saw larger prints from a man, but it was hard to tell if Vika had been following him or he had been following her.

Then Richard saw something that made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

5

Richard squatted down, holding the lantern out close to the ground to better highlight the ridges and depressions. There, in the soft dirt, he could see where Vika had come to a stop, and a short distance beyond that, where she had gone to her knees.

His blood ran cold when he saw that the man's prints tracked around her while she had been there on her knees to turn and stand before her. In his mind, as he stared at the prints, Richard could picture a big man standing over Vika.

It made no sense, but the tracks were clear in the story they told.

“Someone has taken her,” he whispered to himself.

Berdine leaned in with alarm. “Taken her? That’s crazy. Who in the world could take a Mord-Sith?”

Richard gestured behind, then along the building, and finally to the prints on the ground before him. “Her footprints came from between the buildings, where I saw her go, then around behind the back of this building to right here.”

Berdine smoothed a hand back over her hair as she straightened after peering at the ground. “If you say so, Lord Rahl. I can read books, but I can’t read footprints.”

“Well, I can. Look,” he said urging Berdine to lean in again as he pointed. “See there, those impressions? That’s where Vika walked up to here and right there is where she knelt down.”

“Knelt down?” Her nose wrinkled skeptically. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. See this?” He hovered his hand over the indentations made by Vika’s knees. “See this depression? That’s not a footprint. It’s a

knee print. It's deeper where her knees bend and gets shallower as it goes back toward her ankles. See those little round impressions? Those are from the toes of her boots as she was on her knees. She knelt down right here."

Berdine squinted in the lantern light. "I guess I can see what you're talking about. It does make sense now that you explain the depressions in the ground."

He touched the edge of the indentations. "See this? You can see where the wrinkles of her leather outfit as she knelt made these rows of little marks."

Berdine leaned in, looking more closely this time. "All right, I see what you're talking about now. But why would Vika kneel down in the dirt back here, in such a dark, out-of-the-way place?"

With his fingertips, Richard touched a couple of the other footprints. "These prints here are from a man who is big, but not as big as me. They come in here beside Vika's prints—not in front of or behind, but beside her prints—then ..." He leaned over to point out the important part. "... then, see here? He walked around Vika right here, when she went to her knees. Right there. See that? See the prints turned around right there, the toes pointing toward her, right in front of her knee prints?"

"That shows that he stood in front of Vika when she was on her knees."

Berdine blinked as the meaning of it all sank in.

"Look at these prints here. After he stood there in front of her, she got back up. See that sideways indentation? That's the side of the sole of her boot pushing the dirt sideways from her putting weight on her right foot as she got back to her feet in front of the man. That's her prints standing, then, right in front of where she had been kneeling, right in front of the man facing her."

Berdine was staring, her eyes wide. Her face had gone ashen.

Richard flicked a hand. “Then, the man’s prints twist around and they both go off in that direction, down that way, with the man leading, Vika right behind him.”

Berdine swallowed. Her blue eyes welled up with tears.

“He took her,” she said in a meek voice choked with those tears. “Lord Rahl, he took her.” She gasped back a sob. “It can’t be, but that’s the only explanation for why Vika would leave you without her protection, and why she would go to her knees like this.”

Richard finally stood. He whistled for the others; then he looked down at Berdine. “Berdine, what are you talking about? Do you know something about this?”

She choked back another sob as the others rushed around the building and came to an abrupt halt, looking expectantly at the two of them. Richard signaled them to be quiet and wait.

“It can’t be,” Berdine said to no one in particular as she stared off in the direction he had taken her. “But it has to be.”

She sounded forlorn and terrified. While Berdine was bubbly and cheerful, it was always filtered through a Mord-Sith’s iron temperament. Richard had never seen her behave in such a normal human way. Human feelings were suppressed in Mord-Sith. But with Richard as the Lord Rahl, he always hoped that their humanity would return to them. He had seen a number of instances where it rose to the surface. This seemed to be one of those times, yet not a joyful one. It made him ache for all she had been through.

When he reached out and gently held her by her shoulders, he could feel her trembling. He shook her just enough to make her look up at him.

“Berdine, what are you saying? Do you know who took her?”

“Moravaska.”

“Moravaska? Who is Moravaska?”

Her big eyes brimmed with tears. “Moravaska Michec.”

Richard frowned at her. The tears began to run down her cheeks as she shook. He could only imagine what would make a Mord-Sith tremble in fear.

“Berdine, who is Moravaska Michec?”

Berdine wiped tears back off her cheek as she swallowed. Her eyes turned away from him in embarrassment for having shown such emotion.

“A bad man. A very, very bad man.”

Kahlan gently circled a comforting arm around Berdine’s shoulders as she looked back at Richard. “What’s going on?”

When Richard saw the faces of the other Mord-Sith, there was no doubt that they all knew who Moravaska Michec was. But Berdine’s reaction was the strongest.

He gestured to the tracks to explain it to Kahlan. “See here? These are Vika’s tracks. She came around this building.” He pointed. “She stopped and knelt down there. A man walked around in front of her while she was kneeling, and then the two of them walked away in that direction.”

“Are you sure, Lord Rahl?” Shale asked, sounding more than a little skeptical. “You really believe you can tell all that just by looking at the ground?”

“Richard can track a cricket through a field of tall grass in a rainstorm at midnight,” Kahlan said to the sorceress.

Shale arched a cynical eyebrow.

“Figure of speech,” Kahlan said. “But Richard knows tracks. It’s what he was raised doing, what he used to do as a woods guide. If Richard says

that's what happened, then that's what happened."

Richard looked around at the Mord-Sith standing in a semicircle. "Who is Moravaska Michec?"

Nyda was the one who spoke up. "Michec was Vika's trainer. She was taken when she was twelve and given to Michec to be trained. He tortured her for three years. After that first phase of her training, he eventually tortured her mother to death in front of her, but after keeping her alive for a long, long time to numb Vika to another's pain. As her last stage of training to be Mord-Sith, when ordered, Vika had to torture her father, keeping him alive for a protracted period of time to demonstrate that she could keep a captive on the cusp of life and death for as long as she wanted. She was finally ordered by Michec to kill him. When she completed her training, and had been broken those three times, Michec took her as his mate."

Richard knew all too well about a Mord-Sith's training, but even so he stood in pain for a moment in the dragging silence. "Was Michec gifted?"

Nyda huffed. "Oh yes. That was part of how he was so easily able to control his trainees. Michec was feared here at the People's Palace. Darken Rahl let him indulge his sick appetites, not merely with the Mord-Sith in training but on others as well. Darken Rahl ordinarily didn't trust having strongly gifted people around him, but Moravaska Michec was so loyal and devoted to the cause that Darken Rahl trusted him."

"Then that must have been how he captured her, here," Richard said. "With his gift and the power he had over her."

"She would have been kneeling in front of him," Nyda said in a flat tone that unlike Berdine's seemed devoid of all emotion, "so that he could have put a training collar back around her neck and attached a chain to it."

Richard knew all too well about the collar and chain.

In the terrible silence, Berdine, still turned away, said, "Vika wasn't the only one Moravaska Michec trained. Not the only one he took as his mate."

Now he understood Berdine's reaction.

"But Vika was with Hannis Arc," Richard said. "That's where I first came into contact with her. She was his most trusted protection, always at his side. When they had me captive for a time, I told her that her life could be her own. She eventually came to believe me. She's the one who killed Hannis Arc to join with us."

Nyda nodded. "Long before that, Vika belonged to Michec. He gave her to Hannis Arc on the condition that if and when he no longer had need of her services, she was to be returned to him. Hannis Arc liked the status of having a Mord-Sith at his side. But Vika always belonged to Moravaska Michec. She was his property."

Richard rested the palm of his left hand on the pommel of the sword in the scabbard at his left hip. "So then when she killed Hannis Arc, she was supposed to go back to Michec."

"Yes," Nyda said. "But she instead swore loyalty to you. Against all the training and despite being the property of Moravaska Michec."

Richard was incensed at such a concept. "She belongs to no one but herself."

"We have to go find her," Berdine said, the strength returning to her voice. "We have to."

"What we have to do," Shale said in a sympathetic but firm tone, "is get the horses and supplies we need and get away from the palace. It's dark. Sentries won't be able to see which way we ride off. I can help to make sure of it."

"That would mean the death of Vika," Richard said.

"A very long and torturous death," Nyda added.

Shale didn't shy away from Richard's glare. "Vika knows the possible price of her loyalty to you. She knows that her sacrifice might be necessary to protect you. It was what she chose. For your safety, for the Mother Confessor's safety, and for the future hope of everyone in this world carried in the gift of those babies, we need to get to the Keep. Delay would risk everything."

"We don't leave one of ours behind if there is any chance we can save them," Kahlan said with quiet authority.

"I understand, Mother Confessor, but—"

"We would come after you," Richard said in an equally quiet voice.

Staring up at him, Shale considered for a long moment. "I am a witch woman. No one would come after me."

"We would," he said without hesitation.

Her brow twitched as she seemed captured in his gaze, unable to look away. Finally, her voice returned.

"Let's go get Vika back."

6

The eight of them hurried through the halls and corridors of the palace urgently going after the ninth. Nyda and Rikka, both tall and blond, were in the lead, Richard, Kahlan, and Shale in the middle, with Vale, Berdine, and Cassia guarding them from the rear. They took the shortest route, which necessarily meant going through the public areas.

Even at night there were quite a number of people in the sprawling corridors. When they saw the five Mord-Sith in red leather, they kept their heads down and averted their eyes, wanting nothing to do with why they might be rushing through the halls. Richard couldn't help wondering if the Golden Goddess was also watching them. Right then, what mattered the most was not only getting Vika back, but stopping Michec from running free in the palace.

Without the Mord-Sith saying anything, Richard knew where they were headed. They were going to the Mord-Sith's traditional quarters. Vika would once have had quarters there. It seemed unlikely but possible that Moravaska Michec would have taken her back to her room and would be using the adjacent training room to punish her for ever thinking she could walk away from the master who owned her.

In places the cavernous corridors were open to the sky in order to fill the palace with light. Since it was long after dark, that left the lamps and the isolated, flickering light of torches the task of providing light in the corridors. Many of the shops located in the main corridors closed down at night, but a number of others stayed open for the customers who worked in the palace even in the dead of night. Each of the halls and passageways they used stretched nearly out of sight. Sometimes they took to the private passageways in order to take shortcuts.

Because the purpose of the shape of the palace was to function as a massive spell-form, there weren't convenient, direct routes from one place to another. At intervals, wide marble stairs provided a quick way up or down

in order to get to other passageways that crossed over constricted areas so they could continue heading in the direction they needed to go.

In other places they passed statues of people in proud poses. The statues were made of carved and polished stone with different colors of veining, though they were predominantly white. In some areas the statues were twice life size. It had been a very long time since Richard had seen those particular statues. They reminded him in a way of the massive statue he had once carved.

Nyda led them past a sprawling square open to the sky above a small indoor forest. It was a large enough area that many of the trees were full grown, the branches reaching all the way up through the open roof. Mosses and ferns covered the ground. It was a convincing imitation of being outdoors in a beautiful grove. For a brief moment it reminded him of his forest home in Hartland.

“I’ve never seen such an indoor forest before,” Shale said in amazement as they made their way along the path of clay tiles through the center of it. “I suppose there must be many different kinds of places here that would surprise me. I wouldn’t have believed such a place existed inside the palace. Did you know this was in here?”

Richard nodded, not wanting to get into how he knew.

Nyda and Vale led them past an official palace dining room that never closed. It was for the exclusive use of the many people who worked at the palace, especially those who worked at night. Beyond the dining room, they hurried through the halls to another area open to the sky, with pillars supporting arches on all four sides.

Instead of a forest, under the open sky was a square made of short tiled walls filled with white sand raked in concentric lines around an irregular-shaped dark pitted rock in the center. On the top of the rock was a bell to call people to devotion—a devotion that now was key to keeping their world safe from the Golden Goddess and her predator race.

Devotions used to be hours long. Richard thought that was a waste of time and had shortened them to three repetitions, as was the custom when in the field away from the palace. He judged three repetitions to be more than enough to satisfy the magical connection between the people and the Lord Rahl.

When Nyda turned off the main corridor, she took them down a passageway that led them to a place Richard knew all too well.

“These are the Mord-Sith’s quarters,” Nyda said, in a quiet voice in case Michec should be in one of the nearby rooms.

“Do you know which one was Vika’s room?” Richard asked.

Nyda gestured. “This one right here.”

While everyone waited, the Mord-Sith with Agiel in hand and Kahlan standing beside Shale, Richard took a lantern from the wall and went in. With one hand on his sword, and the other holding the lantern, he checked the room. It was small, with a little training room beyond. He opened the wardrobe to be sure, but there was no one hiding in the room, and no place to hide.

“Empty,” he said when he came back out. “We need to check all the rest of the rooms.”

The Mord-Sith each looked in rooms, as did Richard. After checking several dark and empty rooms, he went into one with polished wood floors, a window with a pointed top and trimmed with simple drapes open to the darkness outside, and a bed with a blanket and pillow. Richard was abruptly staggered to remember sleeping at the foot of that bed, as well as being in it. Next to it was a nightstand with a lamp. On the other side of the small room were a simple table and chair. Next to a door into the training room were dark wood cabinets built into the wall. He opened the doors and found the cabinets empty.

He went into the training room to check. It seemed smaller than he remembered. A pulley in the ceiling had a rope that was attached at the wall. The floor had a drain for the blood. He stood frozen for a brief moment before turning away and leaving.

All five of the Mord-Sith silently watched him as he came out. They all knew it had been Denna's room. None of them said a word. They didn't have to. But he was glad they remained silent, because the last thing he would have wanted was for Kahlan to know whose room that had been.

"Nothing," he said. "It's empty. We need to hurry and check the others. If Michec is hurting her, the sooner we can get to her the better."

By the time they had finished checking all the rooms, they had found no sign that either Michec or Vika had been there.

"This is getting us nowhere," he finally said in frustration. "Do any of you have any idea where Michec could have taken her?"

All the Mord-Sith looked equally disappointed as they shook their heads.

"Do any of you have any idea where Michec's quarters used to be?"

Again, they all shook their heads.

Richard paced down the hall a short distance and then back, pinching his lower lip as he tried to think how they could find her in the enormous People's Palace. Everyone watched in silence as he paced.

His head suddenly came up.

"I know someone who should know where Michec would be."

7

Once on the upper level, they hurried along the balcony looking out over one of the main corridors. Rather than a railing, it had a short wall at the edge. They went past side halls and room after room until they finally reached the room Richard was looking for. He opened the door and then stood in the doorway, staring into the darkness within, his anger on a slow boil.

Coming back out, he looked farther down the balcony and saw light coming from one of the other rooms. Three soldiers of the First File on patrol coming along the balcony from the other way eyed the room on their way past it. Each big man had on dark leather armor over chain mail. Each carried a sword sheathed at a hip along with knives. One also had an axe held in a leather holder that covered the sharp blade edges. The wooden handle hung down, swinging freely as he walked. Each had a beard and strands of long dark hair that flowed down over broad shoulders. Their arms looked like they could have been carved from blocks of granite. They were the kind of soldiers that no one would want to cross, the kind of men of the First File who were widely feared.

Richard signaled and the three soldiers sped up a little, then came to a stop when they reached him and his group.

“I’d like you three men to come with me,” Richard told them as he gestured back the way they had come.

They clapped meaty fists to their hearts and then fell in behind Kahlan and Shale, but ahead of the Mord-Sith. The five Mord-Sith were not happy about that, but let it go for the time being because Richard had already started out and they had to catch up as it was.

Shale leaned in close from behind so only Richard would hear her. “I thought the plan was not to let any soldiers see us?”

He knew what she meant. “When we leave, yes. But right now, we can’t avoid it. There have already been hundreds of pairs of eyes on us all along the way coming up here. Don’t forget, it’s not only soldiers the goddess could use. She can use anyone who isn’t gifted. For now, though, it can’t be avoided. Worse, the goddess doesn’t need to possess the person, she merely needs to take a look through any of those eyes to keep track of us. The people she used wouldn’t even know she was doing it. Unless, that is, she exerted control over them to make them do her bidding, like she did with Dori—remember?”

Shale nodded with a grim expression on her beguiling features.

With everyone following behind, Richard hurried to the open doorway with light coming from inside. He paused with his hands on the sides of the doorframe.

A clean-shaven, middle-aged man was sitting behind a desk, bent over his work. A lamp sat on either end of the desk. The man blindly dipped a quill pen in an ink bottle as he focused on jotting notes on a collection of papers arrayed before him.

Richard stepped through the doorway and into the room. The Mord-Sith pushed past the soldiers, like going around giant oak trees, and came into the room behind Richard. The man working behind the desk finally noticed all the people and stood.

“Lord Rahl, you’re out late. How may I help you?”

Richard thought the man might be rattled to have the Lord Rahl and a party that included soldiers and Mord-Sith show up at his door. Instead, he seemed calm and interested in what Richard needed. His blue-edged white robes of office with the gold bands on the sleeves were lying over a chair. The man apparently didn’t care to wear them when he was working and instead was in his shirtsleeves.

“What is your name?”

The man bowed his head of thick, dark hair. “Edward Harris, at your service, Lord Rahl. I am second-in-command to Mr. Burkett.”

“And where is Mr. Burkett? I need to speak with him at once.”

“I believe Mr. Burkett has gone home for the day. But it sounds like it’s urgent.” Edward Harris gestured to the side. “His quarters aren’t far away. I can take you there, if you wish.”

Richard held an arm out behind him. “Lead the way.”

Harris hurried around the desk, not bothering with his robes, and went out to the balcony area, where he turned to his left. At an intersection he led Richard and his party down a simple-looking side hall that turned away from the balcony. A short distance down the hall, he came to a door with Burkett’s name on a small plaque to the side.

Harris lifted a hand toward the door. “These are his quarters, Lord Rahl. Do you wish me to wait?”

Richard nodded to the man and then knocked. “For now, yes.”

When there was no answer, Richard knocked again, more insistently, and then a third time. Finally, he tried the door and found it locked.

Richard, what little patience he had now gone, threw his shoulder hard against the door. The door offered little resistance to his weight or mood. It stayed on its hinges as it banged back against the inside wall. Everyone stepped out of the way as splinters of the wooden doorjamb skittered across the floor of the hall. Knowing how upset Richard was, no one said a word.

Richard charged into the room without waiting for a greeting or an invitation. Burkett, in his stocking feet and still in his official robes, looked up with bloodshot eyes, but didn’t get up from a chair at a table against the far wall. He had a bottle in one hand. The room was orderly and well-appointed with simple but comfortable-looking furniture. A dark doorway

probably led to a bedroom. Richard didn't see a wife or anyone else in the apartment.

"I knocked," Richard said. "Why didn't you answer?"

"Because my workday is done," he said in a slur. "I don't like people bothering me after work." Burkett tried to set the bottle down on the table, but it took him three tries to find it. "What's the meaning of this, anyway? What is it you want?"

Richard seized the man by his tunic, lifted him out of the chair, and slammed him up against the wall. No one, including a surprised Edward Harris, said anything.

Richard clenched his jaw with barely contained anger. "I told you that I wanted to see all the gifted. You told me that you had all the gifted in the palace collected and sent to the library."

"That's what I did." Burkett licked his tongue out from under his overbite. "That was all the gifted living in the palace or staying here as guests, just as you asked."

Richard pulled the man away from the wall and slammed him into it again, banging his head hard enough to crack the plaster. His thin hair slipped off the top of his head where it had been covering his daisylike birthmark and fell down across his red face.

"You lied then and you're lying right now," Richard said through gritted teeth. "You didn't tell me about all the gifted."

Burkett tried, as best he could what with being held up in the air and hard against the wall by an angry Lord Rahl, to gesture his innocence.

"I didn't lie! I told you about all of them. I had all of them collected. All the gifted in the palace were sent to meet you up at the library, just as you asked. I saw to it. I have them all listed."

Richard lifted him away and threw him against the wall again. By now the shock was sobering him up a bit.

“You lied and you’re lying now!”

Burkett’s tongue licked out from under his overbite. “No, I’m telling you the truth. Those were the only gifted living or staying at the palace. Why would you doubt my word?”

“You keep track of everything going on in the palace for the Lord Rahl. That has always been your job. Your office keeps records of the visitors, the dignitaries, and the gifted living here. Especially the gifted. That was the most important duty you had for Darken Rahl, and you have a network of people everywhere who report everything to you, especially about the gifted, because Darken Rahl, like those before him, would not have tolerated you not reporting all of the gifted to him.

“You are the spider in the center of that web, and you know when anyone plucks one of those strands. I am the Lord Rahl now, and I asked for that same information you have always kept for the Lord Rahl. I asked you for all the gifted, and you deliberately didn’t tell me about all of them.”

“But I did, I swear! I swear I told you about every one of them. Every one!”

Richard cocked his head, gritting his teeth again as he put his face closer to the man. “You swear?” Richard asked. “Is that right? You swear?”

Burkett nodded furiously. “Yes. I swear.”

“What about Moravaska Michec?”

The blood drained from Burkett’s red face.

8

“Wait—what?” Edward Harris suddenly leaned in with alarm. “Do you mean to say that Moravaska Michec is in the People’s Palace? Michec is here?”

“Yes. And your superior here knew it.” Richard turned back to the suddenly silent man he was holding up against the wall. “Didn’t you, Mr. Burkett? You knew. Didn’t you!”

The man was clearly caught in the lie, his tongue nervously flicking in and out.

“I asked you a question! You knew Moravaska Michec was here at the palace when I asked for all the gifted to be sent up to the library, didn’t you? Even though your duty is to report all the gifted to the Lord Rahl, you deliberately hid the fact that he is here, at the palace, isn’t that right?”

“Well, I, I, I couldn’t. You have to understand, I just couldn’t.”

Richard slammed him against the wall again, extending the crack in the plaster out on either side of his head.

“Why couldn’t you tell me?”

“Michec was always loyal to Darken Rahl because they shared certain exotic ... indulgences. As long as he left me and my staff alone, it was none of my business.”

“What does that have to do with you not letting me know about him or sending him up to the library with the other gifted?”

“He thought you only defeated Darken Rahl because of luck. He was certain that your luck would run out in the war and that you would never be seen again. He would then step in and assume a place of power here at the

palace. He said that he would use a spell to do something horrifying to me if I told you he was living here.”

The muscles in Richard’s jaw flexed at the thought of Vika being back in that man’s hands. “I am the Lord Rahl. It is treasonous to deceive the Lord Rahl about someone scheming against him in his own house!”

Burkett winced as he nodded. “I know, I know, and I would have told you, but he threatened me if I ever did.”

“How many times have you been to the devotions, Mr. Burkett?”

“The devotions? Why, three times a day, of course. Every day. I never miss a devotion.”

“And you lied each of those times you swore loyalty to me, isn’t that right, Mr. Burkett?”

“Not because I wanted to. Don’t you see? It was because I had to. Michec said that if I told anyone, especially you, that he was living here and planning on taking away your power, he would kill me in the most painful way imaginable.”

“I can understand people being afraid of magic, but as the Lord Rahl I am the magic against magic. You should have told me that he was here, and that he threatened you, to say nothing of his threats against my rule. I would have handled it and I would have protected you. That’s my duty in the oath of the devotion. Now, because of your disloyalty, his schemes are threatening the lives of those loyal to me as well as the Mother Confessor, as well as everything we have fought for.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Mr. Harris asked of Mr. Burkett. “If you were afraid to tell Lord Rahl, I would have done it for you. Why didn’t you simply tell me?”

Burkett stammered and flicked his tongue out, ignoring Harris, trying to downplay his breach of trust. “I, I didn’t know he would hurt anyone, Lord

Rahl. I swear. I didn't know Michec would hurt anyone."

Richard was not about to argue so obvious a lie. "What kind of gift does Michec have?" Richard demanded. "What kind of things can he do?"

Burkett looked past Richard to all the people watching him—the Mother Confessor, the soldiers, and the Mord-Sith. "Well, I, I, I'm not sure."

"I know all too well who Moravaska Michec is," Harris said when Burkett wouldn't admit what he knew. "I thought he fled long ago when you defeated Darken Rahl. I never expected to see that wicked man again. I had no idea he had returned."

Richard turned to him. "Do you know what kind of gift he has? Is he a wizard?"

Harris shook his head. "No, Lord Rahl, not a wizard. Moravaska Michec is a warlock. You know, a witch man."

"A witch!" Shale exclaimed as she stepped forward. With a finger, she poked Richard's shoulder. "That was what I smelled!"

Richard frowned back at her. "What?"

"At the stables, remember? I told you I smelled something that I thought I recognized. I did. I smelled a witch."

Richard turned back to Edward Harris. "Do you know where he would be?"

"Sorry, Lord Rahl, I don't." He lifted out his hands in frustration that he didn't have an answer. "You know how big the People's Palace is. There are probably a thousand places he could be living and we would never know about it."

Richard turned back to Burkett. "Where are his quarters? You knew he was here, so you would know where he is staying in the palace, or should I say where he is hiding. Now, where is he?"

Burkett licked his lips. “He said that if I told anyone he was here, he would do something terrible to me, something that would make me suffer before I died.”

“You don’t need to worry about a spell from Michec. He’s not here. You need to worry about me. Once I find him, he won’t be putting any spells on anyone anymore, because he will be dead.” Richard shook the man again. “Now where is he!”

Burkett trembled as he panted. “He’s, he’s in a remote place where no one ever goes, down a level below where the tombs of your ancestors are located, in an area called M111-B.”

“M111-B,” Richard repeated, keeping his focus on Burkett although he sensed the Mord-Sith shifting uneasily and sharing a look.

Burkett nodded. “That’s right, M111-B. But a witch’s lair down there will be a very dangerous place. You won’t be able to get him out, not out of that place.”

Richard dropped the man down in the chair. “Mr. Burkett, you are relieved of your position.” He turned to the dark-haired man. “Mr. Harris, you are second in charge, under Mr. Burkett?”

“That’s right.”

“As of this moment, you are promoted to Mr. Burkett’s former position.”

“You can’t do that!” Burkett cried out from the chair. “I know more about the palace workings than anyone! I have years of experience!”

“What good is any of it if you take orders from someone working against my rule, working against the peace of the D’Haran Empire? I came to you before and asked you for all the gifted, expecting you to be truthful. You schemed to deceive me. You lied to me.”

“But I had to! I told you, Michec threatened me if I told anyone, especially you.”

“It’s done,” Richard said, incensed by the excuses. “You are relieved of your position.”

The man’s fingers took refuge on the gold bands on the sleeves of his robes. “What position will you put me in, then?”

“None.”

“You can’t do this!”

“We fought a long and terrible war. Many, many people sacrificed their lives so that other people could live in peace and freedom. Even though I have fought and bled for them, everyone is free to dislike me if they so choose. But no one can be here if they are disloyal to the empire and plot against me or the Mother Confessor. No one.”

Richard turned to the grim-faced soldiers. “See to it that Mr. Burkett is escorted from the palace as soon as he can pack his belongings. Watch over him as he does so. Come sunrise, I want him gone. He is banished from the People’s Palace forever under penalty of death if he ever tries to sneak back in. Let your officers know my orders.”

As one they all clapped fists to hearts.

“But Lord Rahl, I made a mistake,” the man pleaded. “That’s all, just a mistake.”

Richard turned back to Burkett. “We all make mistakes. I can understand and forgive mistakes. But this was not a mistake. You acted deliberately. This betrayal cannot be forgiven.” The man started to speak, but Richard held up a finger, warning him not to say anything. “Count your blessings that I don’t have you beheaded for treason.”

Richard turned to the dark-haired palace official. “Mr. Harris, you are in charge now.”

Edward Harris clapped a fist to his heart. “I will not betray your trust, Lord Rahl.”

Richard briefly smiled his appreciation and then turned to the Mord-Sith. “Do you know this place called M111-B?”

All five of them again shared glances.

Richard couldn’t miss the troubled expressions. “Obviously, you do. What do you know about M111-B?”

“Darken Rahl used to call it the Wasteland,” Rikka said.

Richard had never heard of an indoor place with such a name. “The Wasteland? Why did he call it that?”

Rikka shared another look with some of the others. “He didn’t understand the place and didn’t care to. It’s a vast, remote, isolated area. He didn’t know why it was here in the palace. He rarely if ever went down there.”

“He was afraid of it,” Nyda added when Rikka didn’t say it.

Richard’s gaze shifted to her. “Why?”

For a moment, Nyda seemed to search for a way to explain it. “M111-B is a strange, surreal place. It’s kind of self-contained labyrinth of confusing passageways and dead ends. It would be easy to become lost in there and never find your way out.”

“It’s so dangerous that it’s not merely restricted,” Rikka explained. “The whole area is closed off behind a series of locked doors. We can take you there, but if there is a witch man down in there, it is going to be beyond merely dangerous. Unlike Darken Rahl, Michec had a certain ... fascination

with the Wasteland. He used it often. As Berdine can attest, Michec is a very sadistic man. Some called him Michec the Butcher.”

When Richard looked to her, Berdine reluctantly spoke. “The Wasteland is a place you wouldn’t ever want Moravaska Michec to take you. When Darken Rahl ruled, the Wasteland was a kind of refuge for Michec. He used to take people in there where he wouldn’t be disturbed. None of those people he took in there ever came back. If he took Vika in there...”

Richard gripped Berdine’s arm and leaned close. “We’re going to get Vika back. That’s a promise.”

Berdine swallowed her emotion. “I know you will try, Lord Rahl. But you don’t understand Michec ... or the Wasteland.”

“Lord Rahl,” Harris said, “M111-B is more than a confusing and simply dangerous place. I can’t imagine the purpose of it, or why it’s down there, but I’ve heard that in the past somehow people have accidentally managed to get in there. Only a couple ever made it out. I don’t really know about them, but the rest must have died in there. Anyone who knows it fears that place.” He gestured at the Mord-Sith. “As they say, Darken Rahl may have been afraid of the place, but Michec used to go in there.”

Richard wondered why there would be a labyrinth of any kind down in the lower reaches of the palace. In the Keep, yes, there were any number of such places, some of them so complex that it had been a thousand years since people had set foot in some of the confusion of rooms, but those areas had a defensive purpose as traps for intruders. He had never seen anything of the kind at the People’s Palace, and even if it was somehow meant to be defensive, he couldn’t imagine any strategic reason for it to be down in a lower area of the palace.

“With a witch man casting webs down there,” Shale said, “that is only going to make it all the more dangerous, especially when we don’t know the layout of this Wasteland place. He would be able to use that to his advantage to trap us and kill us.”

Richard tapped his thumb on the scabbard at his hip. “A labyrinth of confusing halls and rooms is a real problem by design. We could get really lost in there. Since we don’t know the layout of the maze, we won’t know where we are once we’re in there.”

“I can help with that much, at least,” Harris said, lifting a hand to break into the conversation. “We have maps of every area in the palace. There would be diagrams of M111-B. That number is a charting designation.”

Richard frowned. “You think you have a diagram showing a layout of that place, M111-B? The Wasteland?”

Harris nodded with conviction. “I haven’t seen that specific one myself, but there are plans of every part of the palace. They are necessary for a variety of reasons, from repair work to locating sources of leaks and every other sort of malfunction that needs to be addressed. I’m sure there would be one of M111-B.”

“Show us,” Richard said.

Going for the door without a word, Edward Harris wove his way among the soldiers as they started for Mr. Burkett.

9

As they left Mr. Burkett's apartment, Kahlan felt shock and dismay over the discovery of how disloyal the man had been. In his position he had uncaringly put the lives of everyone in the palace at risk. His betrayal had led to Vika being taken, and she was now in the hands of the shadowy Moravaska Michec. With a gifted man possessing such powers holed up inside the palace, and in a perilous place, no less, it was now a situation beyond merely dangerous.

Kahlan knew that, in a way, Shale had been right that their purpose of getting to the Wizard's Keep overrode the life of one person who, after all, had sworn to protect them with her life. Vika was doing just that. She would want them to leave her and get to the safety of the Wizard's Keep.

The Mord-Sith always came after her and Richard without question or hesitation. Kahlan hated the thought of her in silent terror, thinking no help would be coming.

But at the same time, this was also about much more than saving Vika's life. Evil could not be left to fester and grow inside the House of Rahl. There was no telling what Michec would do once they left for the Keep.

As they reached the end of the hall where it came out to the balcony area, with Mr. Harris leading the way, Kahlan heard a commotion behind her. Along with everyone else, she turned to look back down the hall. Mr. Burkett suddenly bolted out of his room. Unbelievably, he ran toward them in his stocking feet, fist raised in the air, the three soldiers chasing after him. One of the men stretched out, snatching for Mr. Burkett, but the wiry man twisted away. He was yelling drunken curses at Richard.

As the four of them raced out into the balcony, everyone turned to the threat. It wasn't much of a threat, though, so Richard didn't bother drawing his sword. He looked like he intended to simply hook the man with an arm and turn him over to the soldiers.

The Mord-Sith weren't so casual about the threat from an unarmed, skinny, older man. They all had their Agiel to hand and looked like they intended him great violence. As Mr. Burkett charged out of the hall, yelling that Richard had no right to remove him after his years of service, something out of the corner of her eye caught Kahlan's attention.

She heard their howls at the same time that she turned and saw them. Four or five Glee, in a tight group, had already materialized and were racing down the hall toward them with alarming speed, steam still trailing off their dark, wet bodies.

Just as they all turned to confront the threat, another group of the creatures they hadn't seen materialize crashed through the center of their group from the opposite side, catching them all by surprise. Everyone ducked as claws flashed by and wicked, pointed teeth snapped. With Glee converging on them all from both directions at the same time, several of the Mord-Sith were blindsided and knocked to the floor by the tall, dark creatures going for Kahlan.

Richard's arm swept behind, circling Kahlan's waist. As he spun around, he took her from her feet and to the floor just as a claw swept by right over their heads.

A claw did catch one of the soldiers by surprise as he charged out of the hall after Mr. Burkett. It ripped through the leather armor and the flesh and bone under it.

Another one of the dark creatures swung at Mr. Burkett, ripping out his throat so deeply and with such force that the claw hooked his spine and threw the man flying. When he slammed into the short wall, his upper body flipped backward over the wall. Mr. Burkett plummeted to the stone floor far below.

As the dark, slimy creatures attacked from both sides, the Mord-Sith, after having scrambled to their feet, rammed their Agiel into the center of the tall monsters. Kahlan knew they bled; when she heard the shrieks, she knew

that they also felt pain. By the sound of their shrieks, they felt no less pain than any human would under an Agiel.

Richard grabbed the arm of one as it stormed through the midst of the group, clawing wildly at them. He twisted the arm around as the creature's weight carried it on past. Its arm wrenched around with enough force to partially rip it off. When it smacked the floor, the Glee began to dissolve into scribbles. In an instant it had vanished. Others the Mord-Sith caught also vanished before any more damage could be done.

A soldier swung his sword, taking the head off one Glee just before the wicked claws of another hooked his arm, tearing flesh from bone. Another claw ripped open his middle. The soldier fought in vain as he was being taken down and mauled to death.

Richard circled a powerful arm around the head of one of the creatures attacking the soldier. With a violent twist, he broke its neck. In such a sudden death, it failed to vanish back into its own world and instead fell sprawling on the floor.

Some of the creatures went into deep, froglike squats and then sprang up toward them with frightening speed. There seemed to be black shapes flying at them from everywhere. Kahlan ducked back just as jaws snapped, and the creature's pointed white teeth barely missed her face. She pulled her knife and hooked its leg, slicing to the bone. When it fell, Richard drove his sword through its spine.

Berdine jumped onto the back of one of them leaping for Kahlan and pressed her Agiel to the base of its skull. The slimy monster screeched, tipping its head back in agony at the same time as it turned to scribbles. Berdine, on its back with her legs around the middle, suddenly tumbled to the floor when it vanished from right under her. Another one of the monsters saw her at a disadvantage and jumped for her. Berdine managed to flip onto her back on the floor and strike up at the dark shape closing down over her. Caught on her Agiel, it, too, shrieked as it vanished.

Richard lopped off arms reaching for Kahlan. She could see the rage in his eyes, both his own and the power from the sword. As one of the tall creatures dove for Kahlan, he took a mighty swing at it, slicing it clean in two from one shoulder to the opposite hip. The two halves tumbled across the ground, one to each side of Kahlan. The insides spilled across the marble floor, spreading yet more blood and viscera underfoot.

Another one of the big Glee, running in with claws held high for a swing at Edward Harris, slipped on the blood. Instead of taking a lethal swipe at the man, it fell and crashed into him. The impact knocked him over the waist-high wall at the side of the balcony. Harris cried out as he tried to grab the edge, but he only was able to catch it with one hand as he fell.

Richard dove for the wall. At the last instant, as the man's fingers slipped off, he snatched Edward Harris's wrist, keeping him from a fall that would have killed him. As Richard held on to the man hanging down over the side of the wall, he stabbed at a Glee coming for him. Kahlan saw the sword erupt from its back. Richard pushed it off the blade with a foot. As the dying creature fell, another going for Richard tripped over it and met the same fate.

Kahlan reached for a nearby Glee to unleash her power on it. While she didn't need to touch a person, not knowing how it would work on these creatures, she wanted to make contact with it. Cassia slammed into it first, ramming her Agiel into its middle. The creature shrieked in agony, its head twisting violently, its long, dark, almond-shaped eyes going wide. Even as Cassia twisted her weapon to increase the pain, it was already dissolving back to its own world. Cassia screamed in rage that it got away before she could do more damage.

The slime from the creatures, which not only dripped off their smooth black skin but splashed across the floor when they fell and smacked down hard, was mixing with the blood to make for slippery footing. In their frenzied attempts to get at them, some of the Glee slipped and fell.

Richard swung his sword as two of the monsters feinted one way and then the other, trying to find a way past his blade to get at him, knowing he was pinned to the short wall as he held on to the wrist of the man over the edge.

Shale slipped and fell just as she cast an arm out, sending out another wavering crack of power. It blew the shoulder and arm off one of the creatures trying to get at Richard, throwing black flesh and bloody bone up high into the air. The dark shape stumbled around in shock as it dissolved into scribbles and vanished.

The remaining soldier slashed through several more of the tall, dark Glee trying to get at Richard. The Mord-Sith had formed a defensive ring around Kahlan. The way Richard was holding on to Edward Harris had him pinned to the short wall so that he couldn't fight effectively, but he couldn't let go or Harris would die. The Glee all knew it.

"Help him!" Kahlan screamed.

The Mord-Sith reacted to her order and attacked the creatures from behind as they tried to rip into Richard. Here and there the victims screeched in pain briefly before they vanished. Their numbers were being whittled down, making it easier to fight back against them, but if they connected with either claws or teeth, they could do lethal damage.

Everyone, it seemed, was frantically fighting for their lives. Then, almost as soon as the battle had started, it ended with the last two creatures escaping by vanishing into thin air.

The bodies of several mangled or decapitated Glee lay sprawled on the floor. Everyone panted in exhaustion after the brief but frenzied fight.

Richard sheathed his sword as he turned to the man over the edge of the wall to get another hand on him.

A soldier stood in front of Kahlan with his feet spread, ready to protect her with his life. When he saw that the attackers were gone, the soldier ran to the short wall and leaned over, grabbing the man's arm to help Richard hold

on to him. Together he and Richard hauled Edward Harris up and back over the wall. His shirt soaked with sweat, he flopped down, leaning against the wall to catch his breath.

Across the broad corridor, on the balcony that mirrored the one they were on, some people were running for their lives while others stood pressed against the short wall, where they had been anxiously watching the fight. People were running for safety down in the expansive corridor below, too, while many more were gathering around the crumpled body of Mr. Burkett and a severed black arm from one of the creatures.

Kahlan rushed to Richard. Like everyone else, he was breathing heavily.

She put a hand on his chest, thankful that he was all right. "I think that must have taken a few years off my life."

He gave her a knowing smile. "Me too. For a moment there, I thought they had us." He gestured to the two downed soldiers. "Unfortunately, not all of us survived the attack."

Shale shook gore and slime from the hem of her dark dress as she came closer. "I've been righteously frightened often enough in the Northern Waste, but life here at the beautiful, glorious People's Palace is a lot scarier. Those of us still alive still came very close to death today."

Richard seemed to understand her meaning. "As soon as we can leave we'll be a lot safer. Right now the goddess can look through the eyes of any of the thousands of people here and know where we are at any given moment so she can send attacks when we are vulnerable."

"But we can't simply leave a threat here that is just as deadly. If we left now, Michec could stab us in the back, so to speak. If he cast a lethal spell that killed Kahlan, hope for the future would end right there. Just because the Glee are a threat doesn't mean this one isn't just as dangerous and we can ignore it."

Shale nodded with a sigh.

Kahlan saw soldiers of the First File running in from both directions, weapons drawn.

Just as Richard turned back to Kahlan, the air of the hall not far off shimmered with a mass of swirling lines that could mean only one thing.

Kahlan's eyes went wide. There had to be well over a hundred of them, the steam rising off their glistening black bodies as they suddenly materialized, it seemed, at a dead run.

10

In a heartbeat, from not far off down the corridor, a massive mob of the huge, dark creatures with steaming, soft, dark, slippery skin raced toward Richard and his party. They had materialized all bunched together in a writhing, howling mass. At first, all the waving arms reminded him of nothing so much as a dark mass of wriggling worms. As they ran, gelatinous globs slid off their naked bodies to drip and drop all over the floor.

Mouths wide, they roared with ravenous intent, their howls echoing through the vast, multilevel corridor.

Their large, glossy, almond-shaped eyes seemed nearly as black and wet as their soft, moist flesh. When a thin, semitransparent third eyelid blinked in from the inside corner of each eye, the membrane gave their eyes a slightly milky appearance.

In an instant, Richard's emotions went from exhausted relief to full fright. He had thought it was over, but now there were suddenly many times the number of Glee as in the attack that had just ended. He took a quick look over his shoulder. None were coming from behind. At least not yet. The soldiers back in that direction were still a long way off. They would never reach Richard and those with him in time.

All of those claws were terrifying enough, but even more frightening were the nasty, oily faces of the creatures. The thin wet skin wrinkled as their wide mouths gaped open, lips pulling back from long, needle-sharp teeth that glistened with stringy slime. The mouths full of white teeth stood out all the more against the dark mass of the creatures.

The few dozen soldiers racing to Richard and Kahlan's defense from that same direction were suddenly beset by the tall dark shapes slashing away at them with hooked claws. They ran through the midst of the soldiers, overwhelming them with sheer numbers and brute force. The soldiers tried

to fight back—even taking down a few of the Glee, which were then trampled underfoot—but they were being hopelessly engulfed and overrun.

Before the Mord-Sith could launch toward them, before Richard had time to think about it, he reacted out of instinct born of white-hot rage.

He thrust both hands toward the threat.

Clarity came to him in a frozen instant in time.

His birthright, that core of his gift deep within that he hadn't been aware of growing up, but that he had come to know intimately when in the underworld, erupted forth as if it were wild fury brought to life.

In that fraction of a second, everyone seemed to be moving in a dreamlike state so slow that he could see the shock on every face as this sudden new threat materialized out of thin air. The fear and stark terror of what was coming for them was clearly evident on each of those faces. The Mord-Sith, though, lived to defend Richard and Kahlan with their lives, so their fear was layered over with grim resolve, a kind of acknowledgment that they were already dead, so they might as well take down as many of the enemy as they could before there was no power left in their muscles or blood in their veins.

Richard had time to look at each of their beautiful faces, each an image of intelligent beauty, reflecting what could have come of these women had they not been taken at a young age and twisted into killing machines. But now that was what they were, and that visage overlaid whatever else might lie beneath.

In that silent, otherworldly state, everyone seemed to Richard to be moving so slowly so as to almost be statues. He could see the fiercely determined expressions on all of the soldiers as the Glee around them ripped at them with claws and teeth. The whole scene, that instant in time, seemed frozen in midair.

At the same time, Richard could see all the ravenous, wrinkled faces of the Glee—big eyes, small nostril holes, enormous mouths and teeth—all of them struggling in the thick mass, tumbling over one another to be the first to get at Richard and Kahlan. It wasn't a drive for glory, as a soldier in battle might have, but rather a voracious, communal hunger to kill, like beasts needing to feed.

Richard knew without a doubt by seeing their big, almond-shaped eyes that their gazes, frozen in that moment in time, were mostly fixed on Kahlan. They had also been sent for Richard, but more importantly, for her first. Their claws were all reaching out, trying to be the first to hook her, to be the first to rip her open, to sink those needle-sharp teeth into her flesh.

They had been sent to eliminate not merely Kahlan, but the children she carried, the hope she carried.

He could see in her face that Kahlan knew it as well.

From within the crackling cocoon of power, Richard could see it all, watch it all, as everyone moved only the width of a hair with each lazy tick of time.

A kind of sparkling, spiraling, hissing haze swirled up around him, colors flashing up and down within it. Eddies of light rippled through it. Tiny flashes, sparks of energy, ignited all throughout that haze, uncountable numbers glowing with glittering fluidity. Each of those embers sparked out, only to be reborn and set off yet another cascade of glimmering flashes. It was dazzling. The center of the vortex was warm and protective; it was the energy of his own gift expanding outward.

It reminded him of the first time he stood on Zedd's wizard's rock, the way the light threatened to ignite the air around him and the air itself rotated with a dull roar as it swirled like smoke. It engendered that same sense of wonder, that same recognition of unimaginable power being gathered together, of a world he had never known existed coming into being.

He could just see in his peripheral vision that Kahlan, knowing they were coming for her, had straightened her back, the Mother Confessor ready to release her own power. But Richard knew beyond any doubt that in this case, with as many of the dark creatures as there were charging through the soldiers to get at her, she didn't stand a chance.

None of them did.

Only one thing could stop what was but a heartbeat away from becoming reality. He knew that in two heartbeats, they would all be dead.

Unless he stopped them.

Power, ignited by the spark of his rage and fuelled by the singular gift he carried, filled every fiber of his being, swelling through him, around him, a summoned haze of lethal force. It felt hot, sharp, and violent, as if it were erupting from his very soul and tearing its way through him, eager to get to his hands, eager to do his bidding.

In that quiet, clear instant of inner cognition, of wild rage and hate materialized, he also had time to reflect on everything he had been taught, everything he had read, and everything he had seen about the use of the gift. It was all there in his mind, the memories ready to serve his need. In that instant, it felt as if Zedd were there with him, because this was something Zedd had intimately known and understood.

Now, Richard felt it. It was him. It was wrath itself.

Through it all, even as memories of Zedd warmed him, the thing that stood out in his mind, the thing that mattered, was that he was a war wizard, born of a long line of those rare men.

He had always fought that reality. He had always tried to both master it and avoid it, never comfortable with who he was. But in that crystal-clear instant sparked by raw danger, it all came together.

This was his purpose, his calling, his need.

To his other side, Shale was also lifting a hand to use her power. He knew, in the silence of that soft yet unborn instant inside the swirling haze of rage sparkling all around him, that not only was it not enough, but it wasn't going to be fast enough. What she was able to do couldn't begin to match the speed and enormity of the threat. At most, she would only have time to take out one or two of what looked like well over a hundred attackers before the attackers overwhelmed and killed them all.

As much as he admired her courage, this was not for her to do. This was not for the soldiers to do. This was not for the Mord-Sith to do. This was not for the Mother Confessor to do. This was vastly more than any and all of them could begin to do.

This was for Richard to do.

In his mind he realized that the totality of it, while at first seeming overwhelming, simply required a computation of position, distance, degree of angles, numbers of each threat, and their rate of speed as they closed the short distance to their victims.

While the entirety of it was a complex algorithm of various factors, it was, at the same time, a known equation. He knew the foundational formulas from the language of Creation, from notes in a book he had found by First Wizard Baraccus, *Secrets of a War Wizard's Power*, written expressly for Richard three thousand years before he had been born. There was also the underlying work done by Baraccus on azimuth observations, and what Richard had learned from the many other books he had read—even *The Adventures of Bonnie Day*, written by Nathan Rahl—as well as a variety of formulas in the Cerulean scrolls, and several useful ratios from a book his grandfather had once found in the Keep, *Continuum Ratios and Viability Predictions*. There were computations of gradient angles affected by speed that Richard had already made the same instant he saw the perspective and distances while computing reflective effects of what he intended. He had to factor in the power that he would bring to bear and how it would affect every one of the calculations.

He saw all of those calculations and computations in his mind's eye in a flicker of time. They were done almost as soon as he saw what would be necessary.

Those calculations came together with instinct honed from every experience in his life, from every battle he had fought, every person and creature he had killed. He wondered why he had never realized it in quite that same way before.

Even as he wondered, he knew that his time spent in the eternity of the underworld—when he had straightened out tangled connections in his gift—had given him inestimable insight he could have gained nowhere else but in the world of the dead.

All of that power crackling around him, was him. It was a creation of his gift. He had brought it into being. It was his to direct. It was his to wield. It was an extension of his fury.

In that instant, at the peak of the swirling haze of colors and flashing points of light surging up from his soul, Richard unleashed his rage.

The air between him and the creatures distorted as it was violently compressed to an infinitely small point. Throughout the palace, through every open window and door, every place open to the sky, air rushed in to fill the void he had created up on the balcony by that sudden compression. It abruptly sucked the air from the lungs of everyone around him, instantly forming ice crystals around their noses and mouths. Their eyes bulged from the sudden pressure difference.

Richard leaned his body forward, arms out, projecting and directing his gift through his hands to push that point he had created toward the enemy. It shifted in among them as they were helplessly suspended in that moment frozen in time. Near the focal point of that pressure gradient some of their chests ripped open from the internal pressure of the air violently escaping as it tried to equalize the pressure in the vacuum around that compression point. Some of their eyes burst.

As Richard pushed that compression point through their midst to position it where it needed to be in the center of the mass, the tissue nearest the steepest portion of the pressure gradient vaporized. From his point of view, what Richard saw was a hole being tunneled right through the creatures, and unfortunately the soldiers, through flesh and bone and steel as he pushed it to where it was going to need to be. Flesh around the vaporizing tissue shredded as it was sucked in toward the point.

But that was only in the first infinitesimal fraction of time before he released the heat and energy he had pulled from the air he had compressed into that point.

Richard, that power's origin, its genesis, its creator, its commander, gave it what it needed: command.

He pushed his hands out with the effort of pressing that point of concussion not only tighter but also into the midst of the Glee.

When he at last released that compressed energy at that central, infinitesimally small point, it expanded with such a violent detonation that it shook the palace and knocked everyone except Richard from their feet.

The heat of the explosive expansion ignited the air itself. Countless shards of elemental fire, like splinters of white-hot burning glass, tumbled, spun, and flew everywhere inside the expanding discharge of energy. Those glowing splinters of heat flared through everything within the shell of the expanding central point. Flesh, bone, blood, even the steel of the soldiers' weapons, all fragmented into burning particles that blazed from white hot, to red, to ash, all in one explosive instant.

Richard, though, could see it all drawn out in its full dynamic display.

The air that had been sucked into the palace now had to leave, driven before a violent shockwave. The pressure that had built up broke windows in its brutal rush outward. Air that had been sucked from lungs suddenly rushed back in with a thump and an involuntary gasp.

In that instant of release—the center of it located in the center of the mass of Glee—the concussive energy violently reoccupied the void around the central point with such force that everything ignited in something akin to wizard's fire, but not concentrated and not actually fire in the same magic-generated sense. This was something else entirely. This was elemental heat and force, a forge of a war wizard's power unleashed.

To Richard it all was a predetermined, programmed formula unfolding in deliberate stages that he had calculated the instant before releasing the energy he had gathered. To anyone else seeing it happen, it was a sudden detonation that filled the corridor with a blinding flash and thunderous blast, and in that pristine instant of release, they would have felt the hammer of force against their chest as they saw the Glee explode into ash.

Richard felt it all as an extension of his rage unleashed, exquisite, pure, and profoundly violent. It was glorious.

In the ringing silence that followed, the greasy cloud of ash that had been the Glee floated through the air, gradually drifting down.

There were sooty piles of it similar to the ones left in the library's containment field, even if created in a different manner. There were splatters and smears of it against the walls, the pillars, and on the short wall at the side of the balcony. It covered the floor in a thick mass like the aftermath of a black blizzard.

Amid that devastation were also the gray, ashen remains of the soldiers of the First File who had been coming to protect them. They had been there, caught up in the center of that maelstrom of energy Richard had released.

He had ached with sorrow, even as he had released his power, knowing it would also kill those brave men.

11

In the hush as time returned to normal, those with Richard slowly tried to gather their senses. The ones still conscious held their heads, groaning in pain from the pressure he had created both in the compression of the air, and in its explosive expansion.

Richard alone stood unaffected, gazing first for a time at the ashen remains of the Glee and the soldiers, then around at everyone else.

Rikka and Cassia looked to be unconscious. Nyda, Vale, and Berdine were just sitting up, holding their heads and taking deep breaths. Shale put a knee to the floor as she steadied herself before trying to stand.

Richard bent to help Kahlan get up. Like everyone else, she looked stunned. As consciousness gradually returned, she blinked, trying to collect her wits. He lifted her to her feet. Still trying to get her balance, she leaned against him for support.

“Richard,” she managed as she winced, panting to catch her breath, her hands grabbing hold of his arms, “what … what just happened? I thought we were all dead. How can we be alive? What did you do?”

“Not the kind of thing I would want to do outside a containment field, but I had no choice.”

“Where are we?” Rikka asked, sounding groggy and only half awake.

“It’s all right,” Richard said as he grabbed her hand when she lifted it and then helped pull her to her knees.

Shale, still on her knees, gestured. “You destroyed them all.” She squinted at the mass of black ash not far away. “You destroyed them all?”

She seemed confused. People down on the main floor who had also been knocked from their feet were groaning as they began to get back up. Being

farther away, they didn't feel it with the same severity, but they were still affected by what had happened. Such an event expanded for quite some distance beyond the lethal radius.

When Richard looked up, he saw that across the vast corridor, on the balcony that mirrored theirs, a lone Glee stood motionless, claws at its sides, watching.

Richard stared across at it. The lone Glee stared back. For a long moment, they just stared at each other. It didn't try to come closer, or for that matter, do anything. It appeared that it was simply observing.

And then, as the tall black creature and Richard stood gazing at each other, it dissolved back into its own world.

Richard couldn't begin to imagine what that had been about.

*

Kahlan looked around and saw everyone finally getting to their feet. With their hands, they felt their chests, checking themselves over, expecting to find injuries, but there were no injuries to find. Back down the corridor behind them, the soldiers that had been rushing to their assistance were likewise all trying to regain their senses. Some had to steady themselves on a hand and a knee as they pulled themselves together. Some of the men helped others up.

Kahlan looked around, surprised to see that everyone was alive. The Mord-Sith appeared unhurt. Edward Harris leaned back against the short wall a moment, catching his breath. The remaining soldier of the three shook his head, as if clearing the cobwebs.

Kahlan's thoughts seemed to tumble in fragments as she tried to piece together what had just happened. She had seen the mass of Glee materialize, and she had known they were all going to die.

It almost felt as if time itself skipped a beat, then something violent happened. It felt to her like it had been a dream. For a moment she couldn't breathe, as if the wind had been knocked out of her, then she remembered suddenly gasping for breath and feeling life return to her only to lose consciousness.

In a way, there were elements of what had just happened that reminded her of when she released her power. But this time, she knew that it was quite different, and that somehow, in some way, Richard had just used his gift to save them all.

One instant they had been about to die, then the next instant, it seemed, she was waking up on the floor. Down the corridor she could see that the Glee were no more. There was only the greasy ash remains similar to what she had seen in the containment field in the library. She knew without a doubt that these Glee had not had the chance to return to their own world.

She finally hugged Richard, laying her head against his shoulder. "You saved us, Richard. You saved us all. I don't know exactly what just happened, or how you did it, but you saved us."

Richard, staring off at the ashen remains of the soldiers who had died with the Glee, nodded.

"Sometimes," he said in a soft, intimate voice, "I wish I didn't have such ability and everyone else wasn't depending on me to protect them. Sometimes I wish I didn't know the things I know or couldn't do the terrible things I can do."

"Sometimes," he said, staring off at nothing, "I wish I was just like everyone else."

"But you're not, Richard. You're not. Remember what I've always told you? You can be no more than who you are, and no less." She put a hand to the side of his handsome face. "Remember?"

He smiled a little as he nodded.

“I know what you mean, though. Growing up I often wished I hadn’t been born a Confessor, that I was just like everyone else, that I was simply a normal girl. I’ve had to do terrible things with my ability. I’ve had to unleash my power against people I wish I hadn’t needed to kill. So I understand what you’re feeling. But with me, I’ve had a lifetime to come to terms with it. You will, too.”

Richard touched the side of her face, gazing into her eyes. “I know.”

He sighed as he seemed to remember himself again and all the others. “Berdine? Are you all right?”

Berdine, bending to retrieve her Agiel, grinned at him. “I knew you would save us, Lord Rahl. I wasn’t worried at all.”

“Well, I was worried enough for all of you,” Shale said. “If you had any sense, you would have been scared witless.”

“If it’s any consolation,” Cassia said with a smile, “I was just a little bit worried.”

Shale harrumphed. She came closer and peered up at Richard, as if seeing him in a new light. “Lord Rahl, someday when we have the time, I would like very much for you to explain to me precisely what you just did.”

Richard, one arm still around Kahlan, holding her close, shrugged. “It was just some simple calculations.”

“Uh-huh.” She cast a critical look over at the greasy, black, ashen remains. “Simple calculations. Yes, of course. I can see that.” She planted a fist on her hip. “Then how is it that you can turn a raging mob of monsters to ash, and yet you can’t seem to light a lamp with your gift?”

Richard shrugged. “The lamp isn’t trying to kill us all.”

He turned to the soldier still with them. “When those men down there gather their senses and get over here, they can help you take care of this.”

He gestured around at the carnage still left all over the floor from the previous attack. The remains continued to leak blood and fluids in ever-growing pools. “I need to see to some urgent business.”

With a steely look, the man clapped a fist to his heart.

Richard gestured off at the destruction he had created. “I’m truly sorry about those men. They didn’t deserve to die. They especially didn’t deserve to die by my hand.”

The soldier glanced briefly at the ashen remains. “You had no choice, Lord Rahl. You just preserved any hope we have for all of us to survive, for all of us to have a future. These monsters want to hunt and kill us all. Grieve for those fallen men of the First File but know that they were doing what they believed in and what they chose to do.”

Richard gripped the man’s shoulder. “Thank you. You got some of them, too. You did good, too.” He gestured to the remains of the two who had fought off the Glee when Mr. Burkett had been fleeing. “You and your two brothers-in-arms.”

The soldier nodded his appreciation.

“Mr. Harris,” Richard said, as he took Harris’s arm and helped pull him the rest of the way upright, “take us to the place with the maps of the palace you told us about.”

“At once, Lord Rahl.” He hesitated. “And thank you, Lord Rahl, for before.” He pointed over the side. “For catching me.”

“‘Master Rahl protect us,’” Richard quoted from the devotion. “Just doing my job. Now let’s go.”

12

Edward Harris wasted no time as he led Richard and everyone with him to one of the grand marble staircases to begin their descent from the upper level to the secure lower vault where the palace design plans were located. Because it was so open, this was one of the few staircases that didn't echo with all their footsteps. Instead, the whispers of conversation drifted up to them.

When they reached the main floor, Richard saw large numbers of people gathered in small groups all around the expansive corridor, engaged in worried talk about what had just happened. Richard could see soldiers and workers in the distance dealing with the remains of Mr. Burkett as well as a broad area covered with greasy ash—the remains of the Glee Richard had killed.

The hushed conversations, fearful talk, and tearful stories tapered off and died out when the Lord Rahl, the Mother Confessor, and the alluring Shale marched through their midst with five Mord-Sith in red leather escorting them. The eyes of hundreds of people watched them making their way along the corridor. Some were probably surprised to see the Mother Confessor in traveling clothes and wearing a long knife at her belt. Business at the shops had come to an end after many of the customers as well as the people working in the shop had fled in fear for their lives.

Richard wondered if the Golden Goddess was watching through any of those eyes, and if another attack would suddenly appear out of nowhere, possibly with many times the numbers sent for the last attack. He hoped the goddess had been watching through someone's eyes and had been discouraged from the notion that simply sending large numbers would bring her success. Richard feared it would, but maybe if she saw the ashes of hundreds of her kind up on the balcony it would discourage her.

Everyone with him watched nervously for another attack. Down in the corridor the Glee could kill hundreds. For the time being, though, they

seemed to be focused on killing Richard and Kahlan, not the people in the palace.

Richard knew that by now a great number of people—both those seeing the battles play out up on the balcony, and others watching from the upper galleries—would have finally seen the frightening Glee. There was no more keeping it secret. Talk of such sightings, the deadly battle, and power unleashed by the Lord Rahl against the howling monsters would be spreading to every corner of the palace. By morning, everyone would have heard about it. Everyone would be talking about little else.

He knew that fear would have many people either holed up in their quarters or fleeing the palace. There was no safe place anywhere in their world, of course, but the people didn't know that. As far as Richard was concerned, his job was to worry about finding a way to stop the threat, not to give them comfort and assurances.

As they quickly moved down the corridor, he wondered about the lone Glee he had seen off on the opposing balcony, just standing there, watching him. Richard feared to imagine what that was about. Something about the look they shared still haunted him.

At the least that silent observer had seen Richard turn more than a hundred of its kind to ash. If it had been there as a spy for the goddess, then it had some bad news to report back to her. He didn't know if such a report would strike fear into her heart, or merely make her angry and even more determined. What he did know was that appeasement wasn't an option.

Turning off the main corridor, Harris, in the lead, finally took Richard and company out of the public areas and out of the sight of so many people. He wondered if she would think of watching them through Harris's eye. Once they were in the restricted areas, he took them down a series of hallways and corridors.

Kahlan, almost having to run, put her arm through Richard's as she leaned close. "We will get her back, Richard."

Richard nodded. “As long as I’m alive, we will.”

“Don’t put it that way,” she admonished. “Not after what just happened back there.”

Richard forced himself to show her a smile as he briefly hugged her close with one arm.

Four soldiers standing guard over an even more highly restricted area saw him coming accompanied by Mord-Sith. They saluted with fists to hearts. Richard was aware that it would only take one ungifted person, like one of those four soldiers, for the goddess to see where they were going.

Richard didn’t have any idea how the goddess selected a person to use as an observer. He hoped that maybe it took her a bit of time to find a new person.

“Just because we’re in the restricted corridors,” he told the rest of those with him, “doesn’t mean we’re safe. The Glee can show up in here just as easily as they did up on the balcony. Stay alert.”

The Mord-Sith, all spinning their Agiel at the end of the fine gold chains around their wrists, nodded.

Inside the next set of doors was a simple stone service stairwell that did echo all the way down four flights of stairs. At the bottom there was a small room with a locked door. Harris, who fortunately had keys for such doors, hurriedly unlocked it. Beyond, a broad hallway stretched off into darkness.

“People don’t have any reason to regularly come down here, so it isn’t kept lighted,” Harris explained. He gestured to shelves. “We’ll need to take some of those lamps.”

He collected one of the dozens from the shelf, then lit it with a splinter he caught to flame from another lamp mounted to the wall outside that door. Each of the Mord-Sith collected a lamp and let him light theirs from the same splinter.

Harris pointed off into the darkness. “Down that way is where all of the palace plans are kept.”

Nyda stepped out in front of the group. “Wait here. Let me and Vale go check, first.”

Richard was in a hurry, but considering how many surprise attacks they had experienced, he decided to let them do their job. He tilted his head for them to go on ahead, then watched as the bubble of light moved with them down the long, dark stone passageway until they reached double doors the end.

Nyda’s voice echoed when she turned and called back to them, “Clear.”

Richard knew that there was no such thing as clear. The Glee could show up anywhere, but at least he knew they weren’t waiting for them down in the darkness. At least, not yet.

“Let’s go,” he said as he started out.

The rest of the group followed down the passageway of gray stone to the gray-painted, broad metal door. There was an odd kind of lock built into the door that required moving a series of five levers sticking out of the metal covering up or down to one of several dozen specific, marked positions. Once the man had the levers properly positioned, he pulled up on a heavy lever to draw the bolt back. The hinges squealed in protest as it swung open. The air that escaped smelled musty.

“What do you do if you forget the lock sequence?” Richard asked. “Or if you go missing and they need to open the door?”

Harris shrugged with a smile. “There are a half-dozen palace officials who know the lock sequence, but if none of them could be found and if it was important enough, then I guess the soldiers would simply break it down. It’s not like a vault door, such as the one to get into the inner shaft of the plateau, and it’s not protecting a treasure of gold. It’s a strong metal door, but with enough effort I would guess it could be broken down. The lock is basically meant to keep out people who might be snooping around where

they don't belong. An enemy who wanted to attack the palace, for example, could make good use of all the plans and diagrams in here. That's why it's locked."

"I guess that makes sense," Richard said as all of the Mord-Sith rushed in before the door was even fully opened.

"Did Mr. Burkett know the sequences for the lock levers?"

"Of course. Him and then six of his assistants, including me."

Richard didn't say anything, but Mr. Burkett had already proven he was willing to betray the interests of the palace. Richard had wanted him out of the palace and banished forever. But considering that he knew the lock combination, not only to this place but, Richard had to assume, to many others, it was probably a good thing that he was dead.

Once inside, Shale swept out her arm to light all the lamps placed liberally around the surprisingly vast room. It was a lot bigger than Richard had envisioned. Arches all around the outside walls were held up by unadorned stone pillars. Three more substantial pillars down the center of the room held up the row of arches that in turn held up the vaulted ceilings.

Between each pillar against all the walls, crosshatched boards created what had to be thousands of uniform, diamond-shaped cubbyholes for all the rolled-up diagrams. A series of at least a dozen large tables sat in the center of the room, each big enough to spread out one or more of the diagrams. Richard couldn't even begin to guess at the number of rolled-up plans.

Harris went to the right, to the nearest series of cubbyholes holding rolled plans. He pointed up at the label in the top of the arch.

"See? Everything is numbered and labeled so you can find the plan you need if you know the section name in the palace. If you don't, there is a map of each floor over there where each section is labeled. This section between pillars and the ones next to it are all 'W.' We need sections with 'M' at the top."

The five Mord-Sith spread out, going around the room, looking at the letter at the top of each arch.

“Here they are,” Cassia called out from the far-right corner. “Section M.”

“See here?” Harris asked when they reached the section she had found. “They’re organized in vertical rows. Here are rows A and then rows B and so on. Depending on the number of areas with rolled plans, those rows might continue on the other side of the pillar.”

He trailed his finger down one row and then down two more before he leaned in to check the numbers on the bottom of the cubbyholes. He had to go to the end of the section they were in; then he pulled out a long, rolled plan. At the nearest table he spread it out, putting weights each table had on the sides to keep the plans from rolling back up.

He pointed. “See, it’s written here, down at the bottom. ‘M111-B.’”

Richard, standing at the edge of the table, looking down at the diagram, leaned in a little. Everyone to either side leaned in, looking with him. Richard was the only one who actually knew what he was looking at.

He stared at what he was seeing, hardly able to believe it.

“What’s wrong?” Kahlan asked. “Your face just turned white.”

“Lord Rahl, what is it?” Shale asked in the dragging silence.

Richard’s gaze traced all of the passageways, the rooms, the circular halls, the dead ends, the entrapments, the false helix, the lateral routes, the complex of twinned and tripled passageways, checking, hoping he was wrong.

He wasn’t.

“We’re in trouble,” he said, not really having intended to say it out loud.

13

“Why are we in trouble?” Kahlan asked, alarmed by the way he was acting. He seemed not to hear her. “Richard, why are we in trouble?”

She finally had to put a finger on the side of his jaw and turn his face toward her to get him to pay attention.

“What?”

“You said we’re in trouble. Why are we in trouble?”

Richard straightened and took a step away from the table as he raked his fingers back through his hair.

“Richard,” Kahlan said again, this time with exaggerated patience, drawing his name out to make him look at her, “what do you see? What is it?”

He stared at her for a long moment. “It’s a complication.”

“Well, I can see by the weird and confusing design of the place that it looks incredibly complicated. But what do you see?”

He was shaking his head even as she was talking.

“No. You don’t understand. It’s a complication.” He swept a hand out over the plan. “This kind of design is called a complication.”

Shale looked exasperated. “You mean it’s an exceedingly complicated maze? We all can see that. Is that what you mean to say?”

“No,” Richard said, irritably, as if no one was really paying attention to what he was saying. “No. I mean it’s a complication.”

“Richard,” Kahlan said, pinching the bridge of her nose with a finger and thumb as she let out a composing breath, “I know you think that should

explain it, but we don't understand what that means to you. You need to tell us what you mean by that. What are you trying to say?"

Kahlan knew that Richard's unorthodox way of thinking often galloped so far out ahead of what they saw, taking into account things only he knew about or understood, that he often seemed to make no sense. It was one of the reasons the Mord-Sith, along with others, sometimes said he acted crazy. It seemed that way to people because they didn't understand what was in his head.

"It's a complication. That's what this kind of design is called. That is the name for it: a complication." Richard lifted an arm, indicating everything above. "This whole place is laid out atop a spell-form drawn on the ground."

"The People's Palace," Kahlan said, nodding, "yes, we know that. We know the palace is a spell-form."

Shale leaned in, holding a hand against her arm. "A what? A spell-form? Now what are you talking about? You're beginning to sound as crazy as him."

Richard squinted at her in a way that told Kahlan he was having a hard time believing Shale would ask something so basic. "You know ... a spell-form."

Shale folded her arms and straightened without saying anything, clearly not understanding and expecting him to explain.

Richard took a settling breath to back himself up. "Well, you know what a Grace is, right?"

"A Grace?" Shale squinted with uncertainty at what we was getting at. "Well yes, my mother and father taught me to draw a Grace when I was little. I know what a Grace is. What does that have to do with anything?"

Richard leaned toward her a bit. "A Grace is an example of a spell-form. The lines that make up the Grace, the design of it, is called a spell-form."

He moved his finger around in the air before him as if drawing a Grace. “When you drew the Grace you were drawing one example of a spell-form.”

It was Shale’s turn to frown. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. A Grace is a Grace is a Grace.”

Richard threw up his hands in exasperation. “A Grace is a spell-form! Like any spell-form it can be drawn in different ways for different purposes.”

“Different purposes? Now what are you talking about?”

“Think of the spell-form this way. Imagine a plan drawn for a building. That’s called a building design, right? But the resulting building can be different, depending on how you draw the design. Do you see what I mean? It can have more rooms or more floors drawn on the design and the resulting reality in brick and mortar will be a reflection of how the design was drawn.”

She stared openly at him a moment. “So, a spell-form, such as the Grace, can be drawn in different ways?”

“Of course. Didn’t your parents warn you never to draw it in blood? Or out of order?”

“Well, obviously.”

“That’s because a Grace is a spell-form, and like all spell-forms, since they involve magic, if not drawn correctly they can cause great trouble. There are certain spell-forms that are lethal if drawn incorrectly or in the wrong order. Some, like the Grace, if deliberately drawn by a strongly gifted person in certain ways other than the formal procedure like you were taught, can be used to invoke any number of things.”

“Any number of things?” Shale was still frowning as she watched him. “Like what?”

“Well, drawn by the right person, in a specific order and manner, a Grace can conjure up the world of the dead. The Grace is only one of many examples of spell-forms, some of them very minor and relatively unimportant and some quite consequential.”

Shale shook her head to herself. “I’m afraid that where I grew up the gifted were few and far between. I never learned anything about spell-forms, other than what my parents taught me about how to draw the Grace.”

Richard cooled a bit, turning sympathetic. “I understand. I grew up in a place without magic. I’ve since had to learn about it. One of the things I had to learn is the language of Creation. The language of Creation actually uses some elements of spell-forms because it’s representational language.”

“Representational language?”

“Sure. If you see a simple drawing of a bird, it conveys a whole array of meaning—a concept—without needing words, right? That’s how the language of Creation works. It conveys meaning and concepts through symbols, designs, and emblems rather than words.”

She looked intrigued. “Someday you will have to tell me more about the language of Creation, but for now, what is the important point about this particular spell-form?”

Richard pointed a finger toward the ceiling, rotating his hand around to indicate everything above them. “The People’s Palace is laid out in the shape of a giant spell-form, the purpose of which is to give the Lord Rahl more power when he is here, in his home, also called the House of Rahl. That makes the People’s Palace a place of power for the Lord Rahl.”

“More power? More power like what?”

“Like when I turned all those Glee to ash. I was in part aided by the power of the spell-form of the palace itself. It helped me by adding energy to what I did—because I am the Lord Rahl. That’s the purpose of the way the palace was originally designed. Like a castle has thick walls and defensive

parapets and ramparts, the People's Palace was built on a giant spell-form drawn on the ground. That spell-form gives it its shape and is its means of defense for the House of Rahl by augmenting their magic.”

Shale blinked as she thought about it. “No wonder the halls are so confusing.”

“Not if you know the specific spell and the language of Creation. If you do, the layout of the palace makes perfect sense. It's elegant in its simplicity ... as a spell-form.”

“Sure, perfect sense,” she mocked. She gestured at the plan on the table. “So then what's this business about a complication?”

Richard turned back to the diagram as he let out an unhappy sigh. “A complication, which is a spell-form, is an ancillary element of the principal spell-form to which it is attached. In this case, it's a subordinate, supporting spell-form, meant to add power to the rest of the spell-form that is the palace. You might say it's like extra descriptive words in a sentence.”

“So it is a spell-form that exists on its own and it can also be a supporting element of another spell-form?”

“Yes and no,” Richard told her. “This is a specific type of spell-form called a complication. It's not meant to ever exactly exist on its own. Its purpose is to add capability to the spell-form to which it is attached.”

“Then it has a purpose for being here, for being built into the palace,” Kahlan said.

“Yes.”

“So then why does it have you so worried and upset?”

Richard took a deep breath. “The simplest way to explain the problem is that in the language of Creation, the primary elemental component of this

particular spell-form means ‘chaos.’ That means that this spell-form adds an element of chaos to the power of the palace spell.”

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“Chaos,” Kahlan repeated. “In what way?”

Richard lifted a hand as if to say that it was unknowable. “It adds its power to the main spell to which it is attached in chaotic ways, meaning there is no way to predict what it will do. That makes the primary spell-form of the palace more dangerous to enemies of the House of Rahl.”

Kahlan wasn’t at all sure how such a spell would work. “Why would a chaotic element make the main spell-form more dangerous?”

“Because if a wizard—a Rahl here at the palace—uses his magic against a gifted enemy, the palace spell-form amplifies the power of the web he casts.”

“All right,” Kahlan said. “That makes sense.”

Richard held up a finger. “But a dangerously gifted enemy will know how to counter magic. See the problem?”

Kahlan, trying to follow, frowned in concentration. “No.”

“The spell-form of the palace is a known, specific spell-form and for someone powerfully gifted and experienced, it is therefore predictable in how it amplifies a Rahl’s power. Predictability means it can be anticipated and if it can be anticipated it can be countered. If a Rahl’s magic is countered, then it is rendered ineffective against the enemy, right?”

“To solve that predictability problem, what the creators of the People’s Palace did was to add in this chaotic complication.”

“You mean it’s like gravy on a meat pie?” Shale asked.

Richard smiled at her sarcasm. “Sort of. Lumpy gravy, and you don’t know what’s in the lumps.”

He held out a hand toward the plan on the table. “In this case, this complication’s function is to make the web cast by the Lord Rahl and amplified by the primary palace spell chaotically unpredictable. That makes it nearly impossible for a gifted enemy to defend against. See? It’s hard if not impossible to put up a defense if you don’t know what’s coming.”

“That’s incredibly devious,” Kahlan said as she thought about it.

“Indeed it is,” Richard said with a nod.

“Then having it here within the palace must not be so dangerous,” Shale said as she paced off a short distance, considering, and then returned. “After all, it’s been here for millennia, hasn’t it? And it was meant to help a Rahl. So why do you all of a sudden think it’s such a problem?”

Richard wiped a hand back across his face. “Well, because it’s not simply a complication drawn in sand or blood meant to attach to another spell-form drawn in sand or blood to cast a web. This one is huge, and it exists in stone and mortar, not in the dirt drawn with a stick. That means we’re going to need to actually go inside the complication.” He leaned closer to her.

“Inside it.”

“We’re inside the palace spell-form right now,” Shale said with a shrug.

“Hens and hawks. Both birds, not the same animal.”

Kahlan was beginning to grasp his concern. “So that’s why Moravaska Michec would hide in there? Because it’s like he’s hiding in a giant thorn hedge?”

Richard nodded. He turned to Edward Harris. “Could you please get me the plans for this region of the palace—the surrounding areas? And the levels above and below?”

After consulting the palace map, the man went around the room, pulling rolls of the appropriate plans out of their cubbyholes, holding them under an arm as he collected all the ones needed. Once he had them all, he spread

them out on the adjacent tables, putting weights on the sides to hold them open. Following along behind him, Richard reviewed each one, looking increasingly upset with everything he saw.

“What?” Kahlan finally asked as he silently studied one, then another, then went back to the first, then to the last. “What do you see?”

His brow lowered as he leaned in over the plans laid out on all the tables. “This thing is even more extensive than I thought at first. This complication spell isn’t technically two-dimensional, so it’s not a single floor, but actually a number of floors that are involved, all of it self-contained in its own compartmentalized, separate location. Look here,” he said, pointing, “this is the whole restricted wing of the palace where the complication is located, and all of this is the complication. It’s enormous. I mean, really enormous. Not simply in terms of length and width, but on multiple levels.

“It’s one gigantic, three-dimensional labyrinth. I can easily see why people who went in there became lost and were never seen again. If you became disoriented, and didn’t understand the nature of the layout, it would be easy to get lost and never find your way out. That’s why I needed the plans. I need to understand them so that we’ll know where we are once in there.

“This kind of spell-form, being chaotic, is naturally unpredictable, so the builders deliberately kept it totally isolated. When the palace spell uses it, it becomes involved and has purpose.”

He gave both Shale and Kahlan a deadly serious look. “But when it’s idle and left to its own devices, since it’s a chaotic element, it’s unpredictable.”

“Unpredictable,” Kahlan repeated, folding her arms as she looked from his raptor gaze down at the plans, seeing the maze of halls and rooms and staircases in a new light. “We get the concept. It adds chaos to the palace spell.”

Richard was shaking his head. “No, I mean it’s unpredictable in and of itself.”

Kahlan frowned her skepticism. “Are you saying this place made up of confusing halls and rooms can do things on its own, independent of the palace spell?”

Richard nodded. “Exactly. In the right circumstances, this kind of spell-form would be semi-sentient.”

Shale’s jaw dropped. “What! Are you actually suggesting that it’s alive?”

Richard waved a hand, dismissing the notion. “No, no, it’s not alive. I oversimplified what I meant. Its specific purpose is to decide on its own, because it’s a chaos spell-form, how to add power to the primary spell-form. See what I mean? Because it has the power to decide what to do and when, that process makes it seem to mimic life. When I used my power, and the palace’s spell added power, this complication likely added some unpredictable, violent element, making what I did to the Glee functionally more lethal. That makes it virtually impossible to defend against.”

Richard leaned in, giving them both a serious look again. “But when idle and left to its own devices, a spell-form of this nature doesn’t simply sit there. It’s always active, a pot always on the boil, so it can do dangerously unpredictable things, such as entice people in.”

Shale made a face. “Why? Why would it entice people in?”

Richard stared at her for a long moment. “As a self-generated activity—as entertainment, you might say. Not exactly, but that’s the best way I can explain how its function appears to us. Absent direction from the primary spell-form, it boils up and acts on its own, kind of like a curious child when left alone. It starts doing things as a way to fulfill its primary purpose. It’s a hammer, and pretty soon, if not used, it starts to think everything is a nail. When we go in there, we are the nail.”

“Dear spirits.” Kahlan put a hand to her forehead. “Why in the world would they build something that dangerous into the palace?”

“Because it has a valid purpose,” Richard said. “If left entirely isolated, it’s not an issue, and that is what was intended. See here? The complication is not only off-limits, but completely isolated. The builders put it on dedicated levels off to the side, diagonally, under the tombs. To further isolate it, they built in locked doors preventing people from even getting to the stairs down to the complication. It can’t hurt you if you don’t go near it.”

“How can it hurt us?” Kahlan asked. “What can it do to us if we go in there?”

Richard shook his head. “I don’t know. All I can tell you is that whatever it does will be unpredictable.”

“Then we should leave,” Shale announced. “You’ve just done a thorough job of explaining why this complication spell is incredibly dangerous.

“This isn’t your primary objective,” she reminded him with a shake of her finger. “Your duty is to get yourself and the Mother Confessor to the safety of the Wizard’s Keep. The future of magic and the lives of everyone in our world depend on it. The safety of children yet unborn depends on it. Your gift, the Mother Confessor’s gift, your unborn children, are more important than getting Vika out of there.”

“I hate to say it,” Rikka said, “but the sorceress has a point. Like all of us, Vika knows the risks of protecting you. As terrified as she rightfully is of Michec, she would want to die at his hands rather than have you put your life and the life of the Mother Confessor at risk to come in there after her.”

“I agree,” Vale said. “Your safety and the Mother Confessor’s safety are what matters. We should avoid this danger and get to the Keep.”

Nyda nodded her agreement. Cassia did so next. Berdine turned her face away and nodded.

“You don’t understand,” Richard said. “Yes, I want to get Vika out of that man’s clutches, but this is about something more important. If Moravaska Michec is what you all say he is, then once we leave, he will undoubtedly

strike at our backs when we least expect it. He could sabotage our cause just as effectively as the Glee in ways we can't even imagine. He doesn't want me to rule as the Lord Rahl. If we leave and he takes over the palace ...”

“Richard is right,” Kahlan said. “You don't leave a powerful enemy hiding in your home to come at you when you're asleep.”

“Why would Michec be hiding in this complication thing?” Shale asked. “Wouldn't it be dangerous to him as well?”

“Not if he understands it,” Richard said.

“He did,” Nyda confirmed. “He often took captives in there.”

“He's hiding in there, waiting for the right time to kill you,” Berdine said. “Taking Vika proves it.”

“Well, that place down there isn't called the Wasteland for nothing,” Harris said. “We always did our best to keep people away from the section. Somehow people still got in.”

Richard nodded. “The spell-form self-generates things to act on as a way to carry out its destructive, defensive function. I guess you could say it practices killing by enticing unsuspecting people in there and killing them. Moravaska Michec isn't unsuspecting, so the spell-form is in a way his protection.”

Harris shook his head. “I just don't see how, with it being behind all kinds of locked doors and guard posts, people still manage to wander in there.”

“The complication has the ability to undo locks,” Richard said. When they all stared at him, he added, “Because locks are part of the palace, and so is the complication, it's very possible it can unlock the doors.”

“If people die in there,” Shale asked Harris, “then how do you really know that people find their way out there? I thought that people never returned from that place.”

“Well, over the years a few people have wandered out,” he said. “They all died, however, shortly after escaping. But before dying they reported seeing corpses in there, or human bones. I’m not sure what they died of because the First File was responsible for such things, but I know that since it’s their responsibility to keep everyone away, the soldiers were quite alarmed to discover people coming out.”

Shale finally let out a deep sigh. “I can see that I’m not going to be able to talk you out of going in there, and probably for good reason. But if it’s that dangerous, then I think the Mother Confessor shouldn’t go in. I will protect her while you go in and deal with Michec.”

Richard shook his head. “I appreciate the thought, but that’s not a good idea. For all we know, he could be expecting that and while I’m in there trying to find him, he could actually be lurking out here in order to strike at Kahlan. Besides, as you said, he’s a witch man. You’re a witch woman.”

Shale arched an eyebrow. “You seem to know everything, so now you need me?”

“I hardly know everything, Shale. I do know I need your ability. We’re stronger together. In our own way, we each help fill in the blanks. I agree that it’s dangerous for all of us to go in there, but the situation we have on our hands now is that it’s more dangerous for us to split up and more dangerous yet to simply leave this witch man lurking in the maze down there. Taking Vika was his first act of war against us. He very well might have done it to get us to run.”

Shale folded her arms as she looked away in thought. “I hate to admit it, but I think you may be right.”

“So how are we going to deal with him?” Kahlan asked. “He is a witch man. We know all too well how dangerous witch women, like Shota, can be. For all we know, he could be much more powerful. Plus he has us at a disadvantage because he has been living and hiding in there for a very long time. He knows the layout and how to use the complication to his

advantage. He's had time to plot his revenge. How are we going to be able to deal with someone like that?"

Richard gazed into her eyes. "If I have to, I will strangle him to death with my bare hands."

15

“That’s the passageway, there, Lord Rahl,” Nyda said in a low voice.
“Beyond lies the Wasteland.”

“Just so you understand,” Rikka told him, “Vika is most likely dead by now. Michec would not want to let you have any hope of saving her. He would want to use her death to make you feel powerless against him. His specialty is making his victims feel helpless.”

Richard shook his head as he stared off into the darkness. “A man like Michec has bigger designs than killing Vika. His desire is to eliminate me. To do that, he will need her alive as bait.”

Rikka let out a deep breath. “I have to admit, that’s a possibility. He must feel you are vulnerable.”

“You mean because of the goddess?” Kahlan asked.

Rikka nodded. “He has a way of knowing things. He would have chosen this time to strike while you already have an incredibly difficult situation on your hands. He came and took Vika before we could leave in order to keep you here.”

Richard checked a side hall as they went past. “All the more reason we can’t leave and allow him to have free run of the palace. There is no telling what sort of treason he could be up to.”

While Richard and those with him were on their way to find Michec, he had sent Edward Harris back. Harris swore that he would oversee the staff until Richard’s return.

He also swore to investigate any influence by Moravaska Michec among the palace staff. Richard told him that if he found any connections, to have the First File deal with it harshly.

It had been a long way down to where the tombs were located, and then another long journey to the isolated section M111-B. The eight soldiers at the guard station at the first of the locked doors reported no activity.

They admitted that in the past people had been discovered beating on the locked doors from the other side. The doors were opened to release those people, but strict orders said that under no circumstances were they to go in beyond the fourth locked door, even to look for others.

When the soldiers opened the first massive door and Richard stepped inside, glass spheres in brackets began to glow. The soldiers, carrying lamps, were surprised. Richard wasn't.

The soldiers weren't the only ones surprised. Shale gaped at the glowing glass spheres. "What in the world ... ?"

"Light spheres. They were created by ancient wizards," Richard told her. "They can still be found in a number of isolated places, not only here at the palace."

Standing beyond the first door, inside the lighted area illuminated by the spheres, Richard turned to the soldier.

"Do the other men also have keys?"

The soldier looked a little puzzled. "Yes, Lord Rahl."

He really didn't want any of the men getting any closer than necessary to the spell-form of the complication that waited beyond the fourth locked door.

"Then give me your keys. I'll return them when we come back out."

The man looked apprehensive. "Lord Rahl, we have men here who can escort you for protection."

Rikka gestured around at her sister Mord-Sith. “What do you think we’re here for? Just to look pretty?”

“That’s not ...” The big soldier took one look at her glare and cleared his throat. “I can see that you have adequate protection with you.” He glanced back at Richard, eager to look away from the displeased Mord-Sith. “We will be at our post should you need us, Lord Rahl.”

“Have you or the others seen anything out of the ordinary recently?” Richard asked the soldier.

“Out of the ordinary? No, Lord Rahl. It’s been as quiet as a tomb down here. Always is.”

Richard nodded, thanking the man, and then closed and locked the first door. It felt ominous being beyond that first barrier on their way into what he knew to be a dangerously unpredictable spell-form.

“What really bothers me,” Richard said as he pulled the key from the lock, “is how Michec was able to come and go from this place. It appears he may have been hiding down here for a long while, waiting for the right time to strike. But no matter how long he’s been here, he would need to come out from time to time for supplies. And, he obviously went up to the stables to capture Vika and take her back in there with him.”

In the silence, Richard turned back to look at the rest of them. “So, how was Michec coming and going?”

“Maybe there’s another way in and out,” Kahlan suggested as they reached the second vaultlike door. “You know, a secret entrance of some kind. Maybe a service entrance.”

“That wouldn’t be necessary,” Shale said.

Richard had to turn keys in two sets of locks in the second door, and then lift a long lever to draw back heavy bolts.

He turned back to Shale. “What do you mean? Why wouldn’t it be necessary?”

He pulled open the second door. Beyond was another small, empty room made up of rough stone blocks. Light spheres in four brackets began to glow as they all stepped into the room.

“This Michec character wouldn’t need a secret way in and out. He’s a witch man.” Shale shrugged, as if that should explain everything. She glided a hand over the top of one of the glowing glass spheres. “These light spheres, as you called them, start glowing a faint green, getting brighter as we get close, to then glow with a warm yellow-white light when we’re even closer and like now, when I put my hand on it.”

“They react to the presence of the gift,” Richard said as he unlocked the two locks on the third door. “Between you, Kahlan, and me, they have what’s needed to make them glow. Now, what do you mean about Michec not needing a secret way in and out?”

Shale’s brow twitched. “I told you. He’s a witch man.”

“So?”

“Witch women are masters of illusion. As a witch man, I can’t even imagine how powerful he might be. That kind could easily create an illusion that he wasn’t there. That’s how I intend to get us away from the palace without the soldiers, and thus the goddess, knowing we are leaving or which direction we were going. Don’t you remember that I said I would take care of it?”

Everyone stared at her. Richard pulled open the door, revealing the same sort of plain room and the substantial fourth door on the opposite wall. That last one had four locks—two on each side. Instead of a lever, it had a wheel in the center.

“You can do such a thing?” Kahlan asked.

“I’m a witch woman. Of course I can. If I can make snakes appear and disappear from around your ankles, don’t you suppose I can make people not see us leaving?”

“Snakes?” Richard turned to Kahlan. “What’s she talking about?”

Kahlan waved off the question. “So then Michec could cast a web so that the soldiers wouldn’t see him coming and going?”

Shale frowned her incredulity. “You two really don’t know much about witch women, do you?”

“What about the locks?” As soon all of them had stepped into the little room Richard pulled the third door closed and then locked it.

“I’m not sure.” Shale’s face twisted in thought a moment. “Could be any of several methods to defeat them.”

“Like what?” Richard pressed.

“Well, one simple way would be to cast a web to make the guards curious enough to come to check on things and unlock all the doors, giving him the chance to slip in before they are satisfied there was nothing there, and lock the doors.”

Richard didn’t like to think how easy it would be for someone gifted in such a way to create trouble. “But to get back out, would he be able do that from beyond four locked doors? Could he somehow make the guards come back to unlock all the doors so he could get out? And wouldn’t they get suspicious when they were unlocking the doors so often over nothing?”

Shale looked back at the third door Richard had just locked as she considered. “I’m not sure, but there’s an even simpler explanation.”

“Like what?” Kahlan asked.

“He could have used a concealment spell so the guards wouldn’t see him and then simply taken a set of spare keys, like the ones you borrowed.”

Richard grunted unhappily. “You’re right. That certainly would be easier. Then, all he would have to do is cast a concealment web to go unnoticed as he came and went?”

Shale nodded. “That’s the idea.”

Richard unlocked the locks on each side of the final door and then started spinning the wheel in the center. As he did, it drew the heavy bolts back from the iron doorframe set into massive stone blocks to each side.

“It certainly looks like the builders went to a lot of trouble to make sure no one got in here,” Kahlan said.

Richard pulled on the door. “Unfortunately, they didn’t take witch men into account.” The door was so heavy that he had to tug on it several times to start it moving. Once it did start, it slowly glided open on silent hinges.

With the door standing wide open, they all stood and stared in amazement at what lay beyond.

16

There before them, beyond a wide space that stretched off for quite a distance until it vanished into darkness on each side, stood a tall wall made up of huge blocks of age-darkened stone. As with the sides, the light failed to reach far enough up for them to see the full height, but from remembering the plans, Richard thought it rose possibly three stories high. The width of it was far greater.

It almost appeared as if they were standing before a massive castle, as imposing as any Richard had ever seen, as if it had already been there for eons when the House of Rahl came along, and then it had been left in place and the palace built around it. He knew, of course, that wasn't the case, but that was the impression it left him with.

In the center of the wall was a great doorway surrounded by a series of stepped stone arches jutting out from the face of the wall. Each of those stone arches, some carved to look like rope, some with repeated designs, was layered on top of a broader one behind. The mass of those intricate, layered arches was so thick they stood out several feet from the wall. The stacked arches surrounding the wooden wall with the door had to be a couple of stories tall.

A wall of age-darkened oak with large, hammered iron studs laid out in a grid pattern was set back far enough in the deep opening of the enormous arches that it almost made it look like a vestibule. Iron straps crisscrossed over the face of the heavy oak door in the center of that wall. Iron studs pinned where each of the straps crossed connected them solidly together. The strap-hinges looked large enough to easily hold up the weight of the door. There were no locks in the door; there was simply a big iron ring in the center, held out in the hooked beak of a cast bronze eagle head, presumably used to pull open the door.

"Why do you suppose there would be such an elaborate and imposing entryway beyond the four locked doors?" Kahlan asked. "After all, who is

going to see it?”

Richard shook his head as he studied the wall and the entryway, looking for anything suspicious. “I can’t imagine.” His brow twitched. “Unless it’s to pay homage to the spell.”

“You have to be kidding,” Shale said.

Richard merely flashed her a brief smile.

They all shared looks before Richard finally ascended three monolithic slabs making up the stone steps to get up to the door. He hesitated, wiping his palms on his pants before using both hands to grip the big iron ring held in the eagle’s beak. The door glided open, almost willingly, to reveal just the beginning of a dark corridor beyond.

“Are you sure about this, Lord Rahl?” Rikka asked.

Rather than answer, Richard walked through the doorway and into the dark corridor. As glass spheres to each side began to glow, he could see that it was a vast passageway that stretched off into darkness in a gentle curve to the right. He was pretty sure he knew which curved element it was from the spell-form of the complication. Grimy-looking stone walls rose up high to each side. Ornate crown moldings at the edge of the ceiling appeared to be carved from stone as well.

The corners of the ceiling and even joints in the stone of the walls had layers of dirty cobwebs that waved slightly as the air moved when they walked in.

The floor was covered with of a variety of darker marble tiles in a spiraled gridwork pattern. Big squares holding stone mosaics were set into frames of large marble tiles. The designs of the floor swept off into the distance, elaborate, yet dimmed over time by dust and dirt. The gloomy stone making up the walls appeared to be just as grimy from many centuries of accumulated dust. The walls and the floor were so dark they seemed to suck

up the light. All the grout lines in the marble floor were packed with millennia of dirt that helped to darken the whole floor.

Michec might have been a warlock who could cast concealment spells, but as far as Richard knew, he couldn't fly, so he had left footprints in the dusty floor just like any mortal. A pathway through the dirt and dust told Richard that the man had probably been hiding down in section M111-B for some time, since his coming and going had nearly cleared the grimy dirt away down the center of the broad passageway.

Richard spotted smaller footprints near the side, as if a lost woman had kept a hand on the wall for guidance as she walked haltingly on her way farther in to answer a calling from the complication spell. The light spheres wouldn't work unless you were gifted, so unless she carried a lamp, she would have been blind in the total darkness, driven on by a compulsion she didn't understand.

From the well-worn path through the dust, Richard couldn't help but wonder how many times Michec had gone up into the palace proper and what he done on those occasions. He did know that one of those times he had captured Vika.

As Richard moved farther into the corridor, everyone followed silently. Richard held a hand back, touching Kahlan to make sure she stayed close. Nearby glass spheres in iron brackets all the way down the corridor began to glow when they got close enough, making it seem almost as if they were alive, the light welcoming and escorting them in, but the somber stone passageway was so murky that the glass spheres didn't do much to illuminate anything beyond their immediate area.

Before long, as the corridor curved off into the distance, they encountered rooms randomly placed to each side. At each room, since they had no light spheres, Richard took one of the plentiful spheres from a bracket in the hall and carried it with him. The rooms were various sizes, dark, and all were empty. They were elaborately trimmed with complex molding, some with patterned stone paneling, but there was no furniture.

“Why in the world are there rooms in here?” Shale asked, sounding annoyed by the uncanny uselessness of the rooms.

“They’re actually representations of nodules in the complication,” Richard told her. “If you were to draw this spell-form in the dirt with a stick, these would be little tick marks you would make along the main, sweeping line of the spell. Their number and spacing has meaning to the complication. But since the spell-form is so big, it appears that rooms serve that purpose.”

“The rooms aren’t close enough to share walls,” Kahlan noticed. “So what’s in the space between the rooms?”

Richard peered around in another of the empty rooms. “Good question. I have no idea, but since the empty space between the lines and nodes of the design doesn’t serve a function, I suspect those spaces are simply filled in with rubble or possibly stone blocks.”

When they finally came to a closed door on the left, Kahlan stopped and pointed in alarm. “Look. There are fingers sticking out from under that door.”

Richard turned the latch and pushed the door partway open against the weight of a desiccated corpse of a woman lying on the other side. The body looked like it might have been there for many decades, possibly centuries. Coils of long hair were still attached to the almost black, leathery skin of the skull. The full dress was so layered in dust that it was hard to tell what color it had been. The arms sticking out from the sleeves were bones covered in thin, leathery skin that was just as dark as that on the skull.

The delicate, dried-out fingers of one hand were extended under the door in a feeble, dying effort to somehow open the door. The woman, probably dying of thirst, had given up in that spot as the life went out of her.

“Why would she be doing that?” Kahlan asked. “Reaching under the door like that?”

Richard leaned in far enough to look at the other side of the heavy door to confirm what he suspected. “This branch of the spell-form, behind the door, flows in only one direction: in this way.”

Kahlan gave him a questioning frown. “So?”

“So, because it’s a one-way element, you can go into the room because that’s the direction of the flow. The door doesn’t have a handle on the other side, so once you go in and the door shuts, you can’t open it to come back out.”

“Why wouldn’t she break the door down?” Shale asked.

Richard arched an eyebrow. “It’s a one-way element of the spell-form. Besides having no handle on the other side, this is an awfully heavy door for a small woman to break down. But even if she had been strong enough, it would also likely be blocked by the spell’s magic to prevent anything flowing out.”

“Such a trap door is dangerous!” Shale objected. “Why in the world would the builders have put that in here?”

“They were building a complication, not a palace attraction for visitors,” Richard said. “No one is supposed to come in here. People aren’t safe anywhere in here.” He leaned in a little, giving her a look. “Not anywhere. That’s why there are four locked doors protecting the place. That alone should tell you something important.”

Shale’s mouth twisted a little in concession. “I guess you have a point.”

“Just keep that in mind,” Richard told them. “Everywhere in the complication is dangerous in ways that we often won’t even realize. So don’t wander off to look at anything. Stay close and keep a sharp lookout.”

17

After the heavy door pulled closed on its own, like the lid on a coffin, Richard, Kahlan, Shale, and the five Mord-Sith continued on in silence until they finally reached the end of the long, curved corridor. There was a passageway going off to the right and another to the left. The way straight ahead was blocked by a tall, flat metal door.

“How do we know where we need to go from here?” Kahlan asked.

“Since I don’t know where Michec would be, or where he has Vika, I don’t, actually,” Richard told her, “but since we haven’t come across any sign of either one, yet, we have no choice but to go farther in and keep looking.

“The hall to the left is essentially a dead end unless you correctly make a complicated series of choices necessary to get through the maze to an open element in the spell-form. If you make a wrong choice, you could wander around in there for a very long time before finding your way out, if ever. From knowing the complication and having studied the plan Harris showed us, I can tell you that this hallway here, to the right, if you make the correct turns, goes through a series of intersections until it eventually connects to the way ahead on the other side of the node behind this door and then deeper into the complication.”

“So both the hall to the right and this door eventually meet back up?” Kahlan asked.

Richard nodded.

“What’s behind the door?” Shale asked.

“If we’re where I think we are in the complication, it’s a node that should eventually link to a convergence of branches. In the spell-form as you would draw it, it’s made as a circle with a line through it. That hall to the right is a way to get around this constricting node, but it’s a lot longer way

around. The quickest way into the heart of the spell-form is straight ahead through the doorway and across the node. Although it's longer, I think the safer way would be the hallways to the right."

"So if this isn't a room, then why is there a doorway here?" Kahlan asked.

"I don't know for sure, but I imagine it's a way to physically complete the circle of the node to match the way the spell-form is drawn."

Kahlan eyed the dark passageway to the right. "Well, I get a bad feeling about this hallway, here, to the right."

Shale looked from Kahlan to Richard. "Pregnant women have good instincts. I suggest you pay attention to them."

"I always trust Kahlan's instincts."

Richard opened the tall, heavy, flat metal door in front of them. As he did so, light spheres to either side beyond began to glow. They all stepped in and stood in a tight cluster on a small landing inside the doorway and stared out at the colossal octagonal room that came into view as the light spheres brightened.

The vast space stretched high up into darkness. There were no windows Richard could see. As soon as he realized that he was reflexively looking for windows even though windows would be pointless down here, he became newly aware of how deep underground they were, below even the tombs of his ancestors. That awareness brought back his old dread of being trapped in confined spaces underground.

A broad stone walkway built in the form of an arched bridge spanned across to another door on the opposite side of the octagonal room. The walkway was six or eight feet wide. Richard leaned out and looked down at the drop-off under the bridge. He couldn't see a bottom in the darkness below.

There was no walkway around the perimeter of the room to the other side. If they wanted to proceed, they would have to cross the bridge over the

ominous pit.

Kahlan pressed a hand over her nose. “The smell of death is awful in here.”

Richard took a light sphere from a bracket on the wall, held his breath, and leaned out, looking over the edge again. Even with the light sphere it was still too dark to see anything.

“The stench is too powerful to merely be some dead rats or small animals. It has to be the rotting corpses of people.”

“How do you lose your balance on a walkway that wide and fall off?” Shale asked. “There is no railing, but still ...”

Richard gave her a worried look. “Well, if they were moving through here in darkness, they could have simply stepped off the edge without realizing it.”

Because of the smell of rotting flesh, and their need to get on with finding Michec, Richard didn’t want to spend any more time in the octagonal room than it would take to get across.

Even though the bridge was plenty wide enough, everyone stood pressed up against the door at their backs. The gagging stench of death was so oppressive it made them all hesitant to proceed.

“Maybe we should go around after all,” Kahlan said.

The landing they were on had a twin across on the other side of the bridge. There was a closed door at the other end of the bridge that looked the same as the one at their backs. On the walls all the way around the octagonal room were stacked stone moldings, as if at the base of the wall, as well as crown moldings, but there was no floor or ceiling. They were merely decorative. The unpleasant thought occurred to him that tombs were also decorated.

Carved medallions stood out on each facet of the octagon-shaped room. Richard leaned over the edge to peer down the walls. He could see that there were similar carved medallions far below, and also up high on the walls, both almost in darkness, both denoting other levels of the complication. The stone of the room, like the rest of the place they had seen so far, was covered in dark, dirty, gritty, mottled splotches, almost like lichen that grew on rocks. In some places it was draped with filthy cobwebs.

“I think we should trust your first instinct,” Richard said. “After all, the other way around could have even worse things than this.”

“Well, this is just ridiculous,” Shale huffed, obviously nervous about the stone bridge. “Do you mean to tell me that this is part of a spell-form? Like you would draw in the dirt with a stick?”

“Actually, yes,” Richard said. “Like I explained before. It’s a kind of decorative element in the complication.”

Shale’s hands fisted at her sides. “Why in the world would the builders decorate this spell-form?”

It was clear that she didn’t like the place one bit. Richard couldn’t say that he blamed her. But it wasn’t like they had a choice.

“Well, the People’s Palace is similarly built in the shape of a spell-form laid out on the ground. It has a lot of beautiful, grand decorations—columns, arches, statues—that aren’t needed for that spell-form. Things like that aren’t really a part of the spell-form, so I can only assume the builders wanted to make it beautiful or interesting.”

Shale scowled. “You call this beautiful?”

“No,” Richard admitted. “I’d say this place looks—”

“Dangerous,” Kahlan said as she stared out across the bridge.

Richard squeezed her hand. “The whole complication is dangerous, so that would make sense.”

“Do you have any idea where Michec would be?” Shale asked.

When Richard gave a questioning look to the Mord-Sith, they all shook their heads.

“I don’t either,” Richard told her. “From the plans, this place is enormous. I can tell you that this is only the very tip of one edge of the spell-form, and it comprises several levels. Michec wasn’t in any of those rooms behind us, so obviously he has to be deeper in.” Richard pointed down. “By the footprints in the dust, he comes and goes this way, across the bridge. That would make sense, since the most straightforward way deeper into the heart of the spell-form is straight ahead across the bridge.”

Nyda stepped out past Richard. “We’d better go across first and check, then.”

Richard was about to object, but all five of the Mord-Sith pushed between him, Kahlan, and Shale and started across the bridge before he had a chance to argue.

Vale was the last one in line. She looked back over her shoulder. “Just wait there a minute until we check out what’s beyond the door.”

As she turned back to catch up with the others, the stone in the middle of the bridge abruptly shattered and began to fall away. Loud cracking noises came from the rest of the stone. Vale had to leap off one of the big blocks as it tipped and began to tumble into the darkness. Nyda and Cassia grabbed her arms and pulled her onto the far landing with them just as the rest of the stone bridge gave way underfoot and all dropped into the pit.

Clouds of dust rose up as the stone fell with a roar. Large blocks of stone, parts of blocks, chunks, lumps, and flakes all cascaded down into the black abyss.

The Mord-Sith all pressed their backs against the door as even the edge of the landing they were on began to crumble. To keep from falling, they opened the door and stepped back into the dark doorway.

Shale, Kahlan, and Richard backed up against their own door in disbelief as they watched the dust billowing up. They could hear the large blocks hitting the bottom somewhere far below in the darkness.

The five Mord-Sith stood in surprise across the room, in the dark doorway, staring back through the clouds of dust at Richard, Kahlan, and Shale. He was at least relieved that they all made it safely to the other side.

Shale was beside herself. “I thought this was a spell-form! How could that happen? It’s obviously not drawn in the dirt collapsing into a big hole in the middle of it, is it?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Then what just happened?” the sorceress demanded.

“Chaos.” Richard drew his lower lip through his teeth. “The complication just did something chaotic.”

Shale stared back at him. “Or it was a trap laid by Michec.”

“Either way,” Kahlan said, “we can’t leave them over there and us over here. We need to all stay close together.”

“You’re right,” Richard said. “All of you … wait there,” he called across to the five Mord-Sith. “We’ll go around and come meet you over there.”

18

Kahlan followed closely behind Richard as he moved quickly down the side hallway. Shale brought up the rear, watching over her shoulder so that they wouldn't be surprised from behind. None of them said anything about it, but they were all worried about what could have caused the stone bridge to collapse. After all, it had been there since the palace had been built, and it certainly hadn't looked like it was weak.

They were even more worried, though, about the Mord-Sith being separated from them. After all, Michec had separated Vika from them. The bridge giving way felt too much by design.

Despite being in a hurry, Richard stopped briefly at each room they encountered. Each time he took a glass light sphere from a nearby bracket and used it so he could quickly check inside the dark rooms. Most were empty. Several were not.

The first one they found that wasn't empty had a mummified corpse of a man. Even though his clothes were covered with a thick layer of gray dust, they could still see that the dead man was wearing a fancy outfit. Under his embroidered coat there was a shirt with ruffles at the neck and cuffs, that Kahlan recognized as likely a sign of nobility. Expensive-looking rings were still on three of his fingers.

“Do you think,” she wondered aloud, “that some of your wicked ancestors might have put people they didn't like behind the locked doors of this complication to let them wander around, looking for a way out, only to eventually die a slow and terrifying death in the darkness?”

Richard, on a knee taking a quick look at the dead noble, looked back over his shoulder. “I never thought of that, but you certainly could be right. What better way to rid yourself of a pesky detractor vying for power than to put them down here where they would never be found? I think that Darken Rahl, though, favored more public demonstrations of his displeasure.”

Kahlan nodded. “He liked to make examples of people, so these bodies are likely from long before his time. The ones we’ve seen so far look to have been down here for hundreds of years.”

In several places on their way down the hall, they came across yet more desiccated remains with leathery skin, and a few that were mostly bare bones. All the bodies, though, were still dressed in clothes. They found both men and women where they had finally collapsed and died. It was surprising to Kahlan to see how many people had managed to get into the remote place. Or were locked in. Despite the numbers they had found, she supposed that given the timespan it was rare for anyone to find their way in.

When they reached an odd-shaped room, Richard stopped to look in with the aid of the light sphere. Kahlan saw skeletal remains in a far, acutely pointed corner. Before Richard saw the remains, Kahlan was sure she saw the bones move.

“Look,” she said, pointing.

Richard took the light sphere closer. He bent over at the waist to look, then straightened.

“Just bones. Did you see something?”

“I saw them move,” she said.

“Did you see what Kahlan saw?”

Shale shook her head. “I didn’t see them until she said to look.”

“Might have been a trick of the light. The light the spheres give off can be strange at times.”

Richard turned back and with the toe of a boot pushed at the bones. They collapsed inward with a hollow clacking sound. The skull toppled off the spine and rolled a short distance. Richard used his boot to push it back

toward the rest of the remains. After it stopped, facedown, it slowly rolled back over, as if to look up at him.

“Whatever did that, we don’t have time to worry about it,” he said as he left the room. “We need to get to the Mord-Sith.”

Kahlan knew she had been right about the bones moving, and the way the skull had rolled back over was creepy, but she was more worried about getting to the Mord-Sith before Michec did. He had already captured Vika, so he obviously had the gifted ability to deal with Mord-Sith.

As they took a turn at an intersection and rushed onward down yet another gloomy, filthy stone corridor, Richard abruptly stopped. Kahlan noticed a room to the right. The door was closed, but Richard hadn’t stopped to look in the room.

He instead stood frozen, staring ahead at something.

“What is it?” Shale asked from behind his left shoulder.

“I thought I heard something ...”

All of a sudden, Kahlan heard a roar from somewhere off down the corridor. Blinding light ignited in the distance and rushed out from around a corner.

Richard drew his sword. The sound of the steel being freed from the scabbard was drowned out by the wail of the fearsome fireball as it grew in size and speed.

Richard dropped to his left knee. Holding the sword’s hilt in his right fist, he grabbed the tip of the blade with his left hand.

“Get behind me!” he screamed at them. “Get behind me!”

As he was saying it a second time, the corridor out ahead filled with a bigger explosion of expanding, whirling fire. The yellow-orange flames

boiled up as the blaze spilled over the top of itself in its reckless, onward rush. The fire completely filled the corridor as it raced toward them.

Kahlan could feel the heat given off by the inferno. Black smoke swirled in great swaths with the flames breaking through as the fire erupted and rolled toward them down the hallway.

Richard held the sword up like a shield. “Get behind!”

Kahlan crouched down behind him. She had seen Richard use the sword very effectively as a shield against conjured fire.

Shale obviously had not.

As Richard again yelled for them to get behind him, Shale charged at Kahlan, ramming a shoulder into her middle, colliding with such force that it lifted Kahlan from her feet and drove them both into the closed door to the side. Their combined weight smashed the door off his hinges. It fell out ahead of them as together they both flew through the doorway.

Rather than hitting the floor, Kahlan felt herself falling through space.

She realized as she saw the yellow-orange light through the doorway far above her that there was no floor in the room.

Kahlan had just started to scream when she hit the water.

19

Hitting the water was an icy shock that helped drive out what little air Kahlan still had in her lungs from Shale crashing into her.

Shale still had her shoulder in Kahlan's middle with an arm around her waist as they plummeted down underwater. Shale had thought she was saving Kahlan from the blast of conjured fire. Instead she had driven them both into the unknown.

As they hit the water, Kahlan heard Shale's head hit something hard. It made a terrible clonk of skull bone on something just as hard.

As Shale went unconscious, she lost her grip on Kahlan. Kahlan tumbled under the water, unable to get a breath, and lost track of up and down. She panicked with complete disorientation, not knowing which way was up toward the air. She thrashed at the water but, being underwater, her arms couldn't move very fast.

She felt something slimy slide past her arm.

She was desperate to pull in a breath, but she knew that if she tried to breathe, her lungs would only fill with water and she would drown. Her throat had clamped closed with the terror of being underwater. She didn't know which way to swim to get to the surface.

Thrashing wildly, blind, desperate for air, Kahlan thought suddenly of her two babies. Were they to die in this forsaken place? Was she to be yet another corpse left for good in this awful place? Were her two babies to die before they had a chance at life?

As her mind started going black, her arms and legs lost their power and slowly stopped their frantic thrashing. As her body went still, she finally bobbed to the surface. When the air hit her face, she gasped it in. She was horrified by what else she gasped in. Coughing, she had to spit out a

mouthful of bugs. The surface was covered with floating mats of beetles. They crawled up onto her face as she struggled to keep her head above water.

As she swiped the fat bugs off her face, she saw that light came from the doorway, but it was up above her. It was too high up for her to reach for the threshold. She could feel the legs of the beetles getting tangled in her hair as it floated out on top of the water. They clung to her floating hair as if it were a raft.

Kahlan gasped and gulped air as she struggled to tread water enough to keep her head above the surface. Big, glossy, hard-backed bugs swam into her mouth. She spat them out and tilted her head back to get a breath. The surface of the water was covered with the beetles. More scrambled up on her face as soon as she swiped them off.

Overhead, she saw fire roaring past the doorway, sending flickering red, orange, and yellow light down into the dark place where she struggled to keep her head above the choppy surface of the water. She couldn't seem to stop the beetles from crawling over her eyes. They tried to burrow into her nose.

As she got more air and was able to think more clearly, she jerked around, left, then right, looking for Shale. The raft of black bugs floated over her face on waves she stirred up. She didn't see the sorceress anywhere. She knew that as soon as the fire above stopped, it would be pitch black.

Fearing to lose a second of the light, Kahlan upended herself and dove under the water to try to find Shale. The water was murky, so she couldn't see far, but at least it got most of the bugs off her. With her eyes open under the water, even though the visibility was poor, she could see that the water was full of all kinds of debris. She had to push things aside as she searched.

Kahlan had to surface, gasping in air for a moment, more beetles trying to cling to her face when she came up; then she upended and returned to searching underwater. She swam down and down, thinking the sorceress might have sunk to the bottom, but she didn't have enough air to reach the

bottom and she didn't have any idea how deep the water really was. She desperately raced up to the surface again and gasped in some more air, swiping the clinging bugs from her face before getting a big breath and then going back down.

As she pushed the underwater debris aside, she saw that some of it was the handle and hinges of the door they had broken through, slowly sinking with wood still attached.

Then, when she grasped something to get it out of her way, she suddenly realized that she had her fingers in the eye sockets of a partly decomposed skull. She pushed it away as forcefully as she could.

As she did, something long and dark slid through the water close by.

Just as she was starting to head for the surface again, she spotted Shale's hand. Kahlan grabbed the arm floating motionless in the water and with all her strength swam upward toward the light.

She broke the surface just as she was running painfully out of air. She pulled in lungful after lungful of air as she worked to paddle with her feet and one arm, trying to keep Shale's face above the water. Wooden chunks of the broken door, covered with the beetles, floated nearby. The big black bugs crawled up onto Shale as if she were an island. Kahlan spat out more of the fat beetles.

“Breathe! Breathe! Shale! Breathe!”

Kahlan thought that the sorceress might have gasped in some air and spat out some water, but as the light faded, it was hard to tell.

And then, the fire above was completely extinguished, leaving them alone in the dark, dirty water with the big beetles crawling all over their faces. The sound of Kahlan's splashing echoed around her. It stank so bad that she was reluctant to breathe in the air, but she desperately needed it.

“Richard,” Kahlan cried out. “Richard! Help!”

He suddenly appeared in the doorway up above. He was on his hands and knees, peering down into the darkness.

“Here,” he called down. “Catch this.”

He tossed a light sphere down toward her. Kahlan held Shale’s head above water with one hand and struggled to keep her own head above the surface, having to swipe the bugs away from her mouth and eyes as best she could. The sphere wasn’t what she needed. She let it splash down close by and sink.

“Shale’s unconscious!” Kahlan called up. “We’re in water! I can’t hold her up much longer!”

As the light sphere Richard had tossed down sank, it lit the water under her with eerie green light. When it did, Kahlan saw a long dark shape glide silently past.

“Richard!” Kahlan yelled, on the ragged edge of panic. “Help! There’s something in the water!”

Once he realized the situation, Richard pulled the baldric off over his head. Gripping the empty scabbard in one hand, he leaned out and held the rest of it down toward her.

“Grab hold!” Richard called down.

Kahlan turned over and backstroked with one arm to try to pull Shale closer to the dangling loop of leather that was the baldric.

Splashing the water as she reached for it, she missed it over and over as it swung back and forth just out of reach. She suspected that up in the hallway lit by the light spheres, he probably couldn’t see down where she was and didn’t realize that he wasn’t holding it still enough.

When she finally reached the vertical wall below the door, she managed to hook an arm through the baldric. The fat black beetles scuttled up her arm

and onto the baldric. For a moment, she simply held on and panted from the effort of keeping Shale's head above the churning surface of the water. Large, floating mats of the hard-backed bugs collected around her. Kahlan had never felt so dirty in water before.

“Can you put the loop of the baldric around her?” Richard called down. His voice echoed around the empty space above the water. “See if you can put her arms and head through and I'll pull her up.”

With great effort, Kahlan managed to slip the broad leather baldric over Shale's head and then, one at a time, under both arms so that she finally hung limp in the sling. As soon as she had the loop of the baldric around her, Richard pulled up on the scabbard, taking up the weight of the unconscious woman. Slowly, hand over hand, he pulled the scabbard up, lifting Shale's dead weight. Water and big bugs sluiced down off her. Finally, Richard was able to get a hand on the baldric. Once he did, he was able to grab it with both hands and lift. He managed to pull the unconscious sorceress up to the doorway's threshold and drag her in.

As soon as Richard was able to pull the loop of the baldric off her, he lay back down and, holding the scabbard, lowered the loop of the baldric down to Kahlan.

Kahlan frantically reached for it. Bugs tried to crawl up her nose. She had to swipe them away.

As she reached for the baldric again, the slimy thing under the water coiled around her legs and abruptly pulled her under. She only had time to gasp in half a breath. It filled her mouth with wriggling bugs.

20

As she was pulled under, Kahlan sacrificed some of her air to blow out the mouthful of clawing, clinging bugs. She could see ghostly, glowing green light below from the sphere that Richard had thrown down.

The thing compressing around her legs suddenly spun her around, over and over, making her dizzy and nauseous. Then it began whipping her around under the water like a rag doll. She was helpless to fight against the power of it.

Kahlan thought of her two babies. At the thought, terror for them, more than for herself, overwhelmed her. This wasn't only attacking her; it was trying to kill them as well. She tried to swim toward the surface, but each time she did, the thing that had her by her legs tightened forcefully and yanked her back under. It was hard to keep her eyes open to see because the water burned. Things under the water, some hard, some squishy-soft, bumped against her as she was flung helplessly about.

She saw torn parts of bodies suspended in the water as she was dragged past. She saw an arm still attached to a shoulder with a couple of rib bones and dangling flesh. A hand, the tissues where it had been ripped off at the wrist waving gently in the water, floated past her face when the thing that had her paused for a moment. She also saw other, unidentifiable meat with patches of skin or hair drift by under the water. She just wanted air.

Desperate to get away, Kahlan pulled the knife at her belt. With all her strength, she bent herself over to reach the thing that had her legs. Every time she stabbed it, it tugged her, jerking her straight as it dragged her through the water. As the thing thrashed, spinning and pulling her around in dizzying loops, she briefly broke the surface of the water.

Gasping in air, she saw Richard dive off from the doorway above. She heard him hit the water just as she was violently yanked back underwater so

hard she feared it might rip her legs off. She wondered if that was what had happened to the disembodied limbs she'd seen floating in the turbid water.

With the way the thing sharply whipped her around, Kahlan again began having trouble telling up from down, and even more trouble holding her breath. She was exhausted, making it more difficult all the time.

Each time it slowed, giving her some slack, she frantically swam for the surface. She managed to break above the water for just long enough to gulp in another breath before the coil around her legs tightened painfully and submerged her yet again. It almost seemed as if it wanted her to get a breath to keep her alive so it could continue to play with her, like a cat playing with wounded prey, encouraging it to try to get away so it could pounce again.

As she was pulled back down with frightening speed, she suddenly felt Richard's hands grab on to her. He dragged himself downward along the length of her, clutching at her clothes hand over hand to pull himself down far enough to reach the muscly body coiled around her legs. She saw that he had a knife between his teeth. The powerful thing that had hold of her effortlessly dragged them both through the water, Kahlan feet-first, Richard, holding her leg with one hand, face-first, as they were both twisted around and around.

As the snakelike tentacle flexed, tightening painfully, she saw Richard start to hack away at it with his knife. He stabbed the fat gray tentacle over and over. With each stab she could feel the thing flinch and twist, its powerful muscles constricting more each time.

Since it still wouldn't release her, Richard sawed at it with his blade, trying to cut it off her. The blade opened great, gaping wounds, but the creature pulled away before he could finish cutting it off her. Gouts of dark blood poured out, filling the water with inky clouds. Richard clung to her leg and kept stabbing away, over and over and over, desperately trying to get it off her.

Then he was gone, shooting toward the surface for air. In what seemed like only an instant, he was back with renewed determination, hacking away more furiously than ever as Kahlan could feel herself going limp, her vision dimming from lack of air.

At last, with the slimy tentacle slashed and cut nearly in two and bleeding profusely, the pressure on her legs flexed once more and then finally relaxed. Richard kept cutting and stabbing until it finally fell away, freeing her legs. Once it did, with him helping her, Kahlan swam for the surface. She broke above it, her lungs burning, finally able to gasp in air, bugs clinging to her face and hair. She didn't care anymore. She just wanted to be able to breathe.

Richard surfaced beside her, gasping for air along with her. "Let's get out of here."

Kahlan wondered how, but she didn't have the energy to ask.

With an arm around her, under hers, Richard helped her swim over to the side. He hooked the baldric with a hand. "Can you climb up."

Kahlan was gulping air, too exhausted to answer or even swipe the crawling bugs from her face, nearly too spent to tread water enough to stay afloat. She shook her head.

"All right," he said. "I'm going to climb up. As soon as I start up, put your arms through the baldric, like you did with Shale. Once I'm up, I'll pull you up after me. Do you think you can at least do that much?"

Kahlan nodded, unable even to say "Yes," unable even to use her fingers to rake the hard-backed bugs from her face.

She managed to grab the dangling leather strap with a hand as she watched him climb up the baldric and leather belt until he reached the doorway and then drag himself the rest of the way out. He immediately turned around, his head and arms hanging over the edge, water and big black beetles pouring off his hair, to grab the leather belt.

“Put your arms through the loop. Kahlan—you have to put your arms through so I can lift you. You won’t be able to hold on, otherwise. You need to loop it under your arms.”

Kahlan tried. Her arms wouldn’t respond to her wishes. She was so spent from fighting for her life as she was being dragged under the water and whipped around when she tried to stab the thing that her arms felt as heavy as lead. She tried, but she couldn’t lift them.

“Kahlan! Put your arms through!”

She felt numb. It was starting to seem unimportant. She didn’t even have the strength to claw at the bugs trying to crawl their way into her nose. She tried to blow them out, but that didn’t work. She just wanted to drift into eternal sleep and not have to fight any longer.

“Kahlan, do it for our children!”

She looked up at his face in the dim light. “What … ?”

“Put your arms through. You have to do it to save the twins!”

The twins … that thought sent a searing jolt of panic through her. She couldn’t let them die before they had even been born just because she was exhausted. That was no excuse.

With a final effort, she struggled awkwardly to flop her arms through the loop of the baldric, finally lunging up enough to hook it around her under her arms. That was all she could do. The big black beetles scurried up her arms and up the baldric.

As she hung limp in the leather strap, she could abruptly feel herself being lifted. Water and bugs sluiced off her body. The toes of her boots dragged slowly up the stone wall as she was pulled up clear of the water. She could hear Richard grunting with the frenzied effort of pulling her up as fast as he could. In her mind, she was helping him, but her body wasn’t actually doing anything useful to help.

The loop of the leather baldric lifted her until she saw over the threshold of the doorway. Richard gave another mighty pull, lifting her another few feet, then managed to get first one arm around her, then another. Once he had her in his arms, he straightened to lift her up and out. He fell back with her through the doorway, hugging her tightly to him, him on his back, Kahlan sprawled atop him.

What looked like hundreds of fat black beetles fled off them both and scurried across the floor, going for cracks in the stone walls at the sides of the hallway.

Kahlan could feel his heavy breathing and her own as she clung to him, thankful to be alive. He had saved her. He had saved the twins. The terror leaving her body left her trembling.

After she had recovered for a moment, she pushed away and frowned in confusion. “Who held the scabbard for you to climb back up? Did Shale wake up and hold it?”

Richard sat up with her. “No.” He gestured. “I saw that something had to have ahold of you because you kept being pulled under with such force. I put the blade through the metal loop where it attaches to the scabbard, then I stuck the sword in the stone floor for an anchor point. After that, I tossed the rest of the baldric over the edge and jumped in. I was hoping it would be long enough. Fortunately, it was.” Then he said, “By the way, here is your knife back. You managed to stick it in that thing.”

21

Kahlan crawled over to Shale. The soaking-wet sorceress was lying on her back in a puddle of water. Her face was ashen. Kahlan felt the side of her neck and was alarmed to find that while the sorceress still had a pulse, her breath gurgled with water.

“She thought she was saving me from the fire,” Kahlan told Richard.
“That’s why she pushed me through the door.”

Kahlan slapped the woman, hoping to revive her. She shook her shoulders, but Shale still didn’t respond. A few bugs hiding under her collar and hair ran out. At the sides of the hall, there were masses of the glossy black bugs trying to get into the spaces between the stone blocks and the floor. Kahlan pulled out one tangled in her own hair and tossed it against the wall. She flicked one off as it crawled across Shale’s face.

“She risked her life thinking she was saving me and the babies from that fire. We have to help her. It doesn’t sound like she’s breathing right. It sounds like maybe she has water in her lungs. What can we do to help her?”

Richard leaned over, putting his ear close to her mouth for a moment, listening to her breathing. “You’re right, she’s in trouble.”

He quickly placed a hand in the center of her chest and another on her forehead. He closed his eyes as his head lowered in concentration. For a time, as Kahlan watched, nothing seemed to be happening. Each of Shale’s breaths gurgled with water.

Kahlan then saw a warm glow around each of Richard’s hands. It lit his veins, pulsing with each of his heartbeats. The glow warmed in color as it began to flow through into the sorceress, pulsing with the power of Richard’s gift. For a long time, Richard didn’t move and neither did Shale.

Richard had healed her before, so Kahlan knew how good he was at using his gift to heal. When he had done it to her, it had brought her back from the cusp of death. She hoped it could for Shale as well.

Then, after a time, Shale abruptly gasped in a deep breath. She rolled to her side, hoarsely coughing out water. Richard put both hands on her back, letting his power continue to flow into her, helping her clear her lungs of the water until she was finally able to take in breath after breath more normally. Between breaths, she spat out more water.

Richard finally sat back on his heels as they waited, giving the sorceress the time she needed to recover and gather her wits. After a short time, she was finally able to get air free of water in and out of her lungs.

“What happened?” Shale managed to ask in a grating voice as she panted. She lifted both arms, looking at the sleeves of her dress as they dripped water. “Why am I all wet?”

Richard stood and retrieved a glowing sphere from a nearby bracket on the wall. It grew even brighter in his hands. With one hand, he held the light sphere out through the doorway to show her.

Shale staggered to her feet, finally standing with Kahlan’s help. Once she had her balance, she went to the doorway to see what he wanted to show her. She put a hand on the doorframe for support as she leaned in a little and looked down into the gloom.

“Water? Why is there no floor? What is water doing down in there?” She shot Richard an angry look. “Why would there be water in there? That’s just crazy!”

“I don’t know,” he said. “What I do know is that the complication spell-form doesn’t call for it. It could simply be a deep pit that over time filled with water.”

Kahlan wondered if it could be something else.

“Well, that’s just—”

“I told you to get behind me,” Richard said, cutting off the sorceress’s heated rant before it could get a good start. He lowered his head, giving her a serious look from under his brow. “You should have listened to me. I knew what I was doing. My sword acts as a shield against conjured fire. You would have been safe behind me, but instead, thinking you were protecting her, you dove with Kahlan through this doorway. I appreciate that you thought you were saving her from the fire, but as you can see, there is no floor and you both ended up nearly drowning. Had it simply been a deep pit, you both could have fallen to your deaths. In a way, it’s fortunate that the pit is filled with water.”

“Very foul water,” Kahlan added. “We both were fortunate that Richard was able to help us get back out. He pulled you up while you were unconscious. He saved your life.”

Shale looked between the two of them, appearing mortified. “I could sense myself at the veil. How did you manage to bring me back from the brink of death? What did you do?”

Richard arched an eyebrow. “You aren’t the only one who can use your gift to heal.”

Shale had calmed down considerably. “Thank you. None of that could have been easy.”

“It had to be Michec who conjured that fire. We must be getting close, so he tried to kill us. Fortunately, you and Kahlan survived your little swim.”

Shale put her hand to her head and winced. “Why does my head hurt?”

“You hit your head on something down there when we fell in,” Kahlan told her. “I think you cracked your skull on a decapitated head that was bobbing in the water.”

Shale made a face that revealed her disgust. “There are human remains down there?”

“Yes.” Kahlan shuddered as she flicked a waxy white chunk of flesh off her leg. She could see that it looked like human skin on one side of it. “But what I don’t understand is how some kind of creature could be living down there.”

“Creature?” Shale asked, her alarm rising again. “What creature?”

“I don’t know. I thought it might be a snake nearly as thick as my leg that had me, but with the way it whipped me around under the water, I think it had to have been something big and powerful that grabbed me with a tentacle. Richard attacked it with his knife and managed to get it off me. But how could something that big live down there? Other than the random person who fell in, and a lot of bugs, what would it eat?”

Shale considered briefly. “I suspect it might not have been a real creature.”

Kahlan’s jaw dropped. “Not real? Are you kidding me? It was real enough to whip me around underwater and nearly drown me.”

“I think you must be right that a monster of that size couldn’t live down there.” The sorceress gazed off down the hall. “A witch man could have conjured such a thing. Michec probably knew we fell in and conjured it. That’s the most likely explanation. It had to be him trying to kill you.”

“Considering how real it behaved, how powerful it was, and how it reacted and bled when Richard cut it, if it wasn’t real then how are we to be able to tell what’s real from what’s not?” Kahlan asked.

Shale regarded her with a grim expression. “With any kind of witch that powerful, you often can’t.”

“Then how can we possibly fight back?”

“When you are fighting the illusion, you are, in a way, fighting the witch. When you cut the thing attacking you, slashing it as Lord Rahl apparently did, you are, in a way, harming the witch, because the illusion is partially an extension of them. Odd as it may seem, it’s not entirely an illusion, not an independent creature. It’s conjured but also real and as such, in certain aspects, connected to them.”

“We don’t have time to discuss it right now,” Richard interrupted. “We’re all alive. We need to go after Michec. I have a feeling that Nyda, Cassia, Vale, Berdine, and Rikka don’t have any defense against the man, otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to capture Vika. Come on. Conjured fire and creatures, real or not, I need to catch him before he can get far.”

“What are we going to do when we catch him?” Shale asked.

“Kill him,” Richard said without pause as he started out.

22

Richard lifted his arm out to the side to keep Kahlan and Shale back. He could tell by the route they had taken that they were near the heart of the spell-form. They all felt the increased sense of danger.

He wanted to carefully peek around the corner to see what lay ahead, and he didn't want either Shale or Kahlan showing themselves. Not that they were going to be able to sneak up on the witch man. He obviously knew they were coming after him. Besides whatever gifted ability he might have, their mere presence made the light spheres begin to glow. Even with their faint green glow off down the halls, it was hard to see, because the stone walls of the passages in the complication were so dark it seemed to suck up the light.

While the lights beginning to illuminate made it possible to see, it would also alert anyone to their presence, which made stealth impossible.

Even before looking, Richard felt something. He couldn't quite determine what it was he felt, but it gave him a feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach. He decided that the feeling had to be from the continual state of heightened tension. His grandfather would have told him to fear what he knew, not what he was afraid of. But Zedd hadn't ever given him any advice on complication spells or witch men.

Richard slowly moved his head out just enough so that he could see down the dark passageway with one eye.

In the faint green glow, he saw something down low far off down the dark stone hallway. He couldn't quite figure out what it was.

As he squinted, he suddenly realized what it was he was looking at.

Richard let out a curse under his breath. He held up a finger without looking back to prevent Kahlan asking what would have made him use that kind of language.

As slowly and quietly as possible, Richard drew his sword. The gleaming black blade hissed with lethal fury as it came out of the scabbard, its power joining with his own rising anger, eager to be unleashed on the enemy. It was a contest as to what lusted to kill Michec more, Richard's rage or the sword's.

Kahlan leaned in close behind him. "What is it?" she whispered.

He looked back over his shoulder. "I think I see the Mord-Sith."

"You think?" Shale asked.

"What about Michec?" Kahlan whispered. "Do you see him?"

Richard peered into the distance, then looked back over his shoulder. "No. There is a broad opening of some kind. It's a lot wider than a doorway or an intersection with a hall. There is light coming from inside—light from light spheres. That means there has to be someone inside. I'll give you one guess as to who that would be."

"No need to guess," Shale said. "Not only can I smell him, I can sense him with my gift. I can sense how powerful he is. Let me tell you, it's an uncomfortable feeling."

"I know," Richard said. "I feel it too. Stay behind, and out of the way of my sword. If I can get close enough, I intend to separate Michec's head from the rest of him."

"Do you think it's a good idea to simply go in there?" Kahlan asked.

"Not really, but I doubt he is going to come out and surrender. I don't know how else we will have any chance of eliminating him other than going in there after him. Since he conjured fire, that means he can defend against it, so I can't burn him out."

With Kahlan and Shale following close on his heels, Richard came out from around the corner and moved carefully but swiftly down the hallway. He

looked back from time to time, as did the other two, checking for any threat from the rear. He didn't see the witch man anywhere, but he couldn't yet see into the room. It was likely he was hiding inside.

As they reached the broad opening of the vast room, lit from within, they found what Richard feared he had seen.

The five Mord-Sith were lined up on their knees just in front of the broad entrance, each with both hands held out, their Agiel resting in their upturned palms.

Keeping an eye on the room beyond, Richard touched Berdine's shoulder, the first of the five kneeling side by side in a row. She didn't react. He urgently whispered her name as he waved his hand in front of her eyes. She didn't so much as blink. He shook her shoulder; she didn't react.

"Any idea what he's done to them?" he asked Shale.

Shale knelt in front of Berdine and placed her hands to either side of her head. Berdine stared ahead without seeing, without blinking, without moving. After bowing her head a moment, Shale finally stood and let out a troubled sigh.

"Nothing. I sense nothing. They might as well be statues."

"How is that even possible?" Richard frowned at her. "What does it mean?"

Shale regretfully shook her head. "He has somehow blanked them out. That's the only way I can explain it. Berdine doesn't give off any sign of life. I can see that they are alive, but I can feel no sign of life in her. Despite their eyes being open, they are not conscious."

Kahlan gently shook Berdine's shoulder. There was no reaction from the Mord-Sith.

"The only way you are going to get them back is if you can get Michec to release them," Shale told them. "They are captives of his power."

“What if I simply kill him?”

Shale shrugged. “That would work.”

Richard couldn’t imagine what the witch man could have done to make the five Mord-Sith kneel and offer their Agiel.

He really didn’t want Kahlan coming with him, but there was little choice—he judged it more dangerous to leave her behind. Michec would probably love to catch her alone and capture her. That would give him even more power over Richard.

“Can you do anything to block what he can do?” he asked Shale.

Her hopeless look told him all there was to know.

“If I can get close enough, I can use my Confessor’s power on him,” Kahlan said. “That would render him harmless.”

“With his ability, he’d likely incapacitate you the way he did the Mord-Sith,” Shale told her. “I don’t know if it would even work on him, but you would never get the chance to try.”

“Just stay clear of my sword,” Richard said as he made his way past the five unmoving, kneeling Mord-Sith. “Shale, if you can do anything to slow him or hinder his ability, please do.”

23

As he moved between the five Mord-Sith and through the opening, the glass spheres inside brightened enough to reveal what was in the room. As he took in what he was seeing, it felt like Richard's heart came up in his throat.

The room was a central complex in the complication spell. Because of that, it was huge. But that was not what was so terrifying about the room.

In a gridwork pattern about eight or ten feet apart, throughout a large portion of the room, in row after row, bodies hung on chains by manacles on their wrists. In the ghostly green glow from spheres around the room, it almost looked like a forest in an eerie fog; the bodies resembled tree trunks. The silence was haunting.

Besides the gagging stench, it was clear from their condition that the people hanging from chains hooked to the beamed ceiling were long dead. Some of the bodies were charred a bubbled black from head to foot. Most, though, had been skinned alive, their flesh in a bloody pile beneath their feet. The heads, from the neck up, still had their skin, presumably to preserve the expressions of stark terror and pain frozen on their faces. Their hands, held by manacles around their wrists, also had skin, making it look like they were wearing pale gloves. Everything else had been carefully skinned, even the toes. With the red muscles and white tendons exposed, the figures all looked grotesquely naked.

Her face contorted in disgust, Kahlan held a hand over her mouth and nose, the same as Shale. The stench of death was overpowering.

Richard's rage relegated the smell to a distant distraction.

All those bodies hanging motionless above bloody piles of their skin, a mist drifting among them in the near darkness, with the faint green light from all the light spheres filtering among the carcasses and casting multiple fingers of shadow across the floor, was just about the creepiest thing Richard had

ever seen. This had obviously been done by a deranged person who very much enjoyed the grisly work.

As Richard moved into the kill room, through the forest of motionless, hanging bodies, he spotted a faint movement in the distance. He wove his way quietly among the hanging corpses, sword held in both hands, ready to kill Michec.

As Richard came around one of the stiff corpses, he suddenly came face-to-face with Vika. His breath caught and he froze in his tracks.

She was naked, hanging in manacles hooked by a chain to a bolt in one of the beams of the ceiling. Her red leather had been thrown aside. Unlike all the others hanging in the room, she was still alive, if barely, and still had her skin. Her brow tightly bunched, her eyes tracked him as he moved in among the corpses.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, blood down her chin.

She had obviously been beaten to within an inch of her life, but far worse, there was a knife slit that had opened a wound in her belly. A long length of intestine had been pulled out of that incision. It hung down in front, along one bloody leg, some of it at the end coiled on the floor in a puddle of blood beneath her feet.

The end of Vika's Agiel was sticking out of the open wound in her belly, the fine gold chain hanging down from the end.

Had Richard not been so enraged at what had been done to her, he might have thrown up.

“Please,” she whispered, hardly loud enough to be heard. “Please, Lord Rahl … kill me. Please …”

He stepped close. “Stay with me, Vika. I’m going to take care of you.”

Her whole body shook slightly, partly from the beating and the open wound in her belly, but mostly from the pain her Agiel was giving her. It had been pushed into the wound, into her exposed insides, to add unrelenting agony to everything else he had done to her.

Through her pain, she managed to whisper, “Lord Rahl … run …”

Richard started to reach for the Agiel, to pull it out and at least stop that much of her pain, but he stepped back when he heard a soft chuckling. With a hand, he urgently shepherded both Kahlan and Shale around behind him, backing them up to give himself room to use his sword.

He couldn’t tell where the chuckling was coming from. It seemed to echo out from everywhere. As he looked all around for the threat, dark smoke, clinging low to the floor, glided in under the hanging corpses. It snaked slightly as it moved among the bloody piles of skin. It seemed almost alive, the way it moved.

As it came close, it gathered into a thick, greenish-gray cloud. That increasing mass of murky smoke rose up, so heavy it obscured everything beyond it.

Richard took a mighty swing with the sword through the smoke. Wisps of it curled away when the blade passed through and disturbed the air, but there was nothing solid in it.

He heard the soft chuckling again. He gripped his sword tighter as he stepped back from the tall, hazy mass of smoke.

The smoke seemed caught up in a sudden wind, and with a swirl, as if something had passed close by, it spun as it faded away into the air.

When it was gone, there was Moravaska Michec standing before them.

He was a big, barrel-chested man past his middle years. His face was coarse, as if made up of chunky blocks of clay that had hardened together before being refined into proper features. His heavy brow nearly obscured

dark eyes peering out from narrowed eyes. A dark, pockmarked complexion scarred his cheeks and bulbous nose.

He wore what had once been white robes, similar to the white robes Richard remembered Darken Rahl always wearing. But Michec's white robes were stained with what looked like years of blood and gore, as if they had never been washed. Richard could understand why Nyda said that he was called the Butcher. It looked much like he was wearing a butcher's apron.

Richard could easily understand the other reason, hanging all around the room, he was called Michec the Butcher.

There was a cloth stole, such as a priest would wear, around the back of his neck and draped down over the front of his shoulders. It was embroidered with layers of designs in golds and purples. Richard guessed that it had denoted his high rank back when Darken Rahl ruled. But like his robes, it was soiled with blood and dark stains.

The man's full head of short hair was salt-and-pepper, and stuck up from his scalp in greasy spikes. The thick mass of his beard, confined for the most part to the rim of his broad jaw and chin, had been braided into dozens of long, fat strands hanging to mid-chest. They looked like nothing so much as snakes hanging from the rim of his face.

His fat fingers, ending with jagged, broken nails, were stained with messy black muck under the nails and in the crevices and wrinkles, obviously from many years of his sadistic fixations.

His sly smile conveyed abject cruelty.

“So tell me,” he said as he gestured all around. “Really, was this your plan? To simply walk in here and kill me? That was your plan? You think yourself that powerful? Powerful enough to rule, to protect those loyal to you?” He clucked his tongue with amusement. “My, my. Such arrogance.”

Richard didn't answer. His mind was spinning with a thousand thoughts. For some reason, though, it felt like he couldn't connect those fragments of thoughts, couldn't make his mind work.

The man's cunning smile widened. "You all are probably wondering why your meager abilities aren't working. Well, I must confess: I spelled this room. And you simply walked right in here, distracted by my collection of pretty people. So you see, like the Mord-Sith, you three aren't as powerful as you imagine yourselves to be, because in here, even what powers you do have are blocked." He lifted his heavy brow. "Just like all your pretty little Mord-Sith. Not even your bond protected them."

Richard tried to summon the gift he knew was there, somewhere, deep inside, but it simply didn't respond. By the look on Shale's face, she was having the same problem.

Michec gestured to Vika. "She's mine, you know. Darken Rahl himself assigned her to me for training. After that, she was given to me. I only loaned her to Hannis Arc. He was supposed to return her. When he died—because of you—she was obligated to come back to me. An inviolable duty she chose to ignore." A dark look came over his features. "I am seeing to it that she fully regrets her disobedience." He reached out and with the tip of his first finger pushed the Agiel a little deeper into the gaping belly wound.

Vika's eyes rolling back in her head; her chin quivered as a shudder of agony went through her.

"I will similarly deal with her equally disloyal sister Mord-Sith." He glanced toward the opening into the room where they were kneeling before looking back at Richard. He smiled with menace. "Once I deal with you and your lovely wife."

He lifted a hand as he walked off a few paces, then turned back. "Once I do, I will be richly rewarded. You see, the Golden Goddess has become ... annoyed, shall we say, by your stubborn resistance." He stepped closer. "I assured her I could handle the situation. We came to ... an arrangement."

Richard was horrified to learn that Michec was working with the Goddess. Even though he was filled with rage, he couldn't make his gift respond to that fury. Try as he might to call it forth, it felt like there was nothing there. Whatever kind of spell the witch man had used, besides blocking his gift, it also made Richard's thinking foggy.

Michec swept a hand around in a grand fashion, as if proudly showing off his years of dedicated labor.

“As you can see, my work continues. It was interrupted by you, Richard Cypher, the pretend Lord Rahl. For that, you will suffer, I can assure you.

“But the goddess, you see”—he smiled with meaning at Richard as he pointed a finger toward Kahlan—“wants more than anything to hold the bloody remains of the two children growing in her belly. I assured her she will have her wish.”

Richard came unhinged.

With a cry of rage, he abandoned his attempt to use his gift and instead went for the man, sword-first.

24

It felt to Richard like they must have been walking for days. The Azrith Plain seemed endless. Richard's mouth was so dry from thirst that he could hardly swallow anymore. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. The air felt hot, but there was no sun. He judged that it must be sometime after twilight by the odd, purplish light laced with streaks of green. He was glad to finally be gone from the People's Palace and on the way, but he was so thirsty he could hardly think of anything else.

"Is there any water left?" he asked Kahlan.

"No."

He seemed to remember, then, that he had told her to have the last few swallows. But why didn't they bring more?

For what seemed hours, they trudged on across the parched ground. Despite how long they walked, it never seemed to get any darker. The sky was black above them, with the color of a purple bruise farther down where it met the horizon.

"Why didn't we bring horses?" he asked. "This would be easier if we had horses."

"You said we didn't need them," Kahlan said in a flat tone from behind him somewhere.

Richard squinted, trying to remember why he didn't think they should bring horses. That seemed strange. It was going to be a long journey. Horses would have made it easier, and they could have carried more water.

They had already been traveling for what seemed days and days. As they marched ever onward, the night seemed endless. The Azrith Plain, so barren and empty, seemed endless. He wished they had brought horses. And more water.

“Do you want to stop?” he asked.

Kahlan didn’t answer. She was probably so thirsty she didn’t want to talk. He felt too thirsty to bother asking again, so he slogged on.

It was hard to walk, because his legs hurt. His back hurt, too, but more than anything, his shoulders ached something fierce.

After endless walking, he at last began to see trees out ahead. He did his best to pick up his pace. He started to run for them, because trees meant water. Despite how hard he tried, his legs moved like they were mired in molasses.

When he finally reached the trees, he found a brook, as he had known he would. The water looked clean and cool. He fell to his knees and started scooping up water, drinking and drinking and drinking from his hands.

But the water, no matter how much he drank, didn’t do anything to quench his thirst.

Kahlan and Shale stood watching him, as if he had lost his mind.

“Aren’t you thirsty?” he asked as he looked back over his shoulder at them.
“Don’t you want to get a drink?”

Kahlan shrugged and knelt then. She cupped her hands, bringing water to her lips. She drank and then scooped more water, to drink that as well. It ran between her fingers. He watched as she drank, wishing that he could satisfy his thirst the way she seemed to be able to do.

He tried it again. Nothing. No taste, no wetness. Nothing. He put his face under the water, guzzling. It simply wouldn’t quench his terrible thirst. It angered him, because it looked so good and felt so good in his hands, so good against his lips. But he might as well have been drinking sand for all the good it did him.

He rushed to his feet when he saw Kahlan walking on ahead. He had to protect her and the twins. Even if he couldn't get a drink to satisfy his thirst, he had to protect her.

That was all that mattered: protect Kahlan.

Richard saw that his wrists were bleeding. He stood and stared at them. He couldn't make sense of it.

When he looked up, he saw his skinny grandfather standing on a rock in among the trees.

“Zedd?” Richard blinked. “Zedd, is that you?”

“Indeed it is, my boy.”

His familiar, wrinkled face, his skin and bones under his simple robes, looked so good that it made Richard ache.

“Zedd … what are you doing here?”

He peered at Richard in that way that Richard knew well. “To help you, of course, my boy. I have come to help you.”

Richard suddenly broke into tears of joy at seeing his grandfather. He had thought he was dead, but here he was, alive.

“Listen to me,” Zedd said.

Richard nodded, still choked with tears. “I’m listening.”

“You have to get out of here, Richard.”

Richard looked around. In the dim, greenish-purple light, he couldn't see much.

“Get out of here?” Richard frowned at the warm and familiar face of his beloved grandfather. He loved the old man so much. “What do you mean, I

have to get out of here? We're on our way to the Wizard's Keep. We have to get to the Keep where it's safe while I figure out a way to stop the Glee."

"You're not going to get there this way. You have to get away from here, first."

Richard glanced around and then took a step toward his grandfather, so close he knew he could reach out and touch his wild, wavy white hair if he wanted to.

"Get out of here? Why? Where are we?"

Zedd smiled in a sad way. "Don't you know, my boy?"

"No," Richard said, his mouth so dry he could hardly talk. "What is this place?"

Zedd looked at Richard in silence for a long, loving moment.

"Richard, you are in the Wasteland."

The word "Wasteland" jolted Richard so hard that he gasped and opened his eyes. He saw blood running down his arms from the manacles clamped tightly around his wrists. His shoulders were in terrible pain. With a sense of dread and alarm, he realized he was hanging from the ceiling among the corpses.

He had been hung from the ceiling gridwork of iron pins, facing Vika. Barely conscious, she trembled in agony as she watched him through slitted eyelids. He could read the look on her face. It said he shouldn't have come after her.

Richard twisted and looked over to see Shale on his left, hanging unconscious in manacles.

He looked to his right, then, and was horrified to see Kahlan also hanging in manacles chained to the ceiling. Unlike Richard and Shale, she was naked.

Her face had lurid bruises on it. Her left eye was a painful-looking shade of purple and almost swollen shut. Blood from her mouth dripped in strings from her chin. She was trembling as tears ran down her cheeks. She didn't look over at him.

At the sight of Kahlan hanging helpless in the forest of dead bodies, Richard went wild, thrashing around, trying to break free. He drew his knees up, bent himself in half, gripped the chain and lifted his legs up over his head to push his feet toward the ceiling to try to pull out the anchor bolt. The ceiling was too far to reach. His legs flopped back down and he swung helplessly. The attempt extended the wounds in his wrists. Fresh blood ran down in little rivulets. He had no idea how long they had been unconscious and hanging from the ceiling.

Michec stepped into his field of view. "My, my. The Lord Rahl himself, the man who defeated the great Darken Rahl. You hardly seem so big and important now, do you?"

Richard gritted his teeth in rage at himself, at how stupid he had been to underestimate Michec and let them be captured. He desperately wanted to kill the witch man. He struggled to pull his bloody hands through the manacles so that he could get them around the man's throat. Despite how slippery the blood was, the iron bands were far too tight for that to work.

"I was more than angry that you ruined the empire that Darken Rahl was building. It was going to be grand. You only defeated him through trickery, not through strength. You are weak and undeserving to take such a great man's place." Michec smiled with hate. "But now, the Golden Goddess and her kind will build a better empire, a world that will serve as their hunting ground. I will run it for them."

When the man lifted a hand back, Richard was horrified to see the tall, dark shapes of at least a dozen Glee step out of the shadows of the hanging, skinless corpses.

Michec twined one of the beard braids around a filthy finger as he stepped away from Richard to stand in front of Kahlan. He grabbed her face,

gritting his teeth, squeezing so hard she cried out.

“For your husband to truly understand how worthless and undeserving he is as a leader, I am going to let him watch me skin you alive.” He pulled out a knife and as he looked into her eyes, he licked the blade. “Please do scream for him, would you? As soon as I finish, these Glee will claw those two babies from your womb as you hang helpless and watch them do it.”

Three of the glistening Glee came forward on their long, muscular legs, clacking their claws, eager to get at her. Kahlan’s eyes went wide in terror as one of them pressed its sharp claw against her belly and hissed in her face.

Michec used the back of his hand to urge the dark creatures back. “Not yet, my friends. You must wait until I finish.”

The Glee reluctantly stepped back.

“After I have skinned her, then you may rip out her babies. You have my oath, the oath of a witch man.”

That seemed to satisfy them and they retreated farther back into the shadows to wait until he was done.

Michec leaned in close to Kahlan, smiling at her, inches from her face, as he cut through the skin along the side of her throat.

“Shall we begin, Mother Confessor?”

Gazing into her green eyes, Michec worked two fat fingers in through the pocket he had cut and under her flesh to get a good grip on her skin. Panting in terror, Kahlan let out a shriek that felt like it ripped Richard’s soul.

The story continues.

Episode 4 of the Children of D'Hara

WITCH'S OATH

coming soon...

About the Author



TERRY GOODKIND is a number one New York Times bestselling author. His Sword of Truth series has sold over 20 million copies. Before writing full-time, Terry worked as a wildlife artist, a cabinetmaker and a violin maker. He writes thrillers as well as epic fantasy and lives in the desert in Nevada.

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