

TERRY
GODKIND

A NOVELLA
CHILDREN
OF D'HARA

— I —

THE SCRIBBLY
MAN

BY TERRY GOODKIND

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THE SCRIBBLY MAN

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Terry Goodkind



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THE SCRIBBLY MAN

1

“I have come to accept your surrender.”

Richard’s brow drew down as he leaned an elbow on the padded leather arm of the massive chair he was in. He was more perplexed than troubled.

The rotund man was wearing formal white robes ornately embroidered in gold designs that added an air of dignity to his pear shape. He stood patiently at the head of a line of supplicants stretching back into the distance of the enormous, vaulted room. Windows high up to the side let in streamers of hazy afternoon light that gave the vast room an almost spiritual quality. Fat black marble columns, variegated with red and gold veins, rose up in a tight row to each side of the long room. Gilded capitals atop the columns supported balconies where large crowds watched the proceedings along with the people on the main floor in the shadows behind the columns.

At the head of the room, behind Richard and Kahlan sitting in stately chairs at a heavy table on a raised platform, a ring of leaded-glass windows surrounded a two-story-high, carved white marble medallion depicting the long lineage of the House of Rahl. It was an impressive seat of power. Growing up in the woods of Hartland, Richard could never have imagined such a place, much less imagined himself sitting at the head of it.

Nearby, palace officials and their aides stood ready to assist with anything needed. Heavily armed men of the First File, between Richard and Kahlan and the rest of the roomful of people, did their best to remain inconspicuous, mostly staying out of the way toward the sides. Behind Richard and Kahlan, in front of the massive marble medallion, six Mord-Sith stood at ease.

Five of the Mord-Sith wore their white leather outfits. One, Vika, was wearing red. Richard had requested that they all wear white for the occasion so as to appear less menacing, it being a time of peace, after all. Vika had said that she was there to protect the Lord Rahl and if she looked menacing,

all the better. Richard had long ago learned that life was easier if he let Mord-Sith have their way with petty issues. He knew that if it was vital, they would follow his orders. To the death if need be.

The people to each side on the main floor and up in the balconies, everyone from farmers to nobility, all fell silent as they waited to hear what the Lord Rahl would say in response to such an outlandish demand. The heavyset man in gold-embroidered white robes waited as well.

Beneath an elaborate white cloak pushed open in front by his substantial girth, silver chains around his neck just below the folds of false chins held a variety of small ornaments that reminded Richard of symbols of rank that army officers wore on their uniforms for formal occasions.

Richard remembered seeing similarly dressed people in an open tent down in the market at the base of the enormous plateau that supported the sprawling People's Palace. The people down in the market and tent city had been gathering for weeks to have a chance to witness the kind of event that had never taken place in their lifetimes—or to profit from it.

“My surrender,” Richard repeated in a quiet voice into the hushed air. “My surrender of what?”

“Your world.”

Some of the nearby soldiers and court attendants chuckled. When they did, many of the people watching joined in to giggle with them. Or, at least they did until they saw that Richard was not amused.

His gaze flicked to Kahlan, seated beside him behind the table where supplicants could place maps, contracts, and other documents for their review. Besides the white dress of the Mother Confessor, he saw Kahlan was wearing her Confessor face. Her long hair gleamed in the light coming from the ring of windows behind them. He couldn't imagine a good spirit looking any more striking.

Her beautiful features revealed nothing of what she might be thinking. Despite how unreadable and dispassionate she may have appeared to others, Richard could read the fire in that calm expression. Were she a wolf, her ruff would be standing up.

Richard leaned toward her, wanting to know why she seemed to be seething. She finally broke eye contact with the man and leaned toward Richard to speak in a confidential tone.

“This man is from Estoria. The medals and awards around his neck mark him as the consul general.” She stole a brief look at the man. “I think I may have met him once or twice, long ago when he was less important.”

“What’s Estoria?”

“It’s one of the minor lands in the Midlands that I oversaw as Mother Confessor. For the most part the people there earn their living as professional diplomats for hire. The consul general would be the equivalent of a king.”

Richard frowned. “You mean they are diplomatic mercenaries?”

She nodded. “Strange as it sounds, there are those who need a diplomat to champion their cause. When they do have such a need, they will often hire an Estorian. Estorians sometimes argued the position of a patron before me on the council.”

Richard was still frowning. “Who would have need of such services?”

“You’d be surprised. Anyone from a wealthy individual having a dispute with a ruler to a kingdom on the verge of war. Skilled diplomacy can in some cases resolve a dispute, or at least stall armed conflict indefinitely while talks drag on and on. Estoria is considered neutral ground, so they often host the different sides in complicated negotiations. Putting up such important guests and their entourage is part of how the people there earn a living. The consul general will often host elaborate banquets for each side of the negotiations. At separate times, of course.”

“Estorians have a long history as professional diplomats. They live to negotiate. They are very good at it. It is often said that an Estorian would try to negotiate with the Keeper of the underworld himself to try to come to an agreement on a later departure from life. That’s what they do—they negotiate.”

“So what has you so upset?”

Kahlan gave him a look, as if she couldn’t believe how dense he was being. “Don’t you see? Estorians negotiate. They don’t ever make demands. It’s not in their blood.”

Richard finally understood what had her hackles up. This man was certainly making a demand, and apparently such a thing was completely out of their nature.

He turned his attention back to the diplomat standing before the gate through the railing not far in front of them. A pair of guards in intimidating

dark leather breastplates over chain mail stood at the railing to each side of the low gate to admit supplicants with documentation for review or anyone else Richard or Kahlan might gesture to come closer.

Inside the railing to either side were the phalanxes of palace officials in white or pale blue robes. They dealt with a diversity of matters within the People's Palace and even D'Hara at large. They seemed to relish minutiae. Once a person had come before Richard and Kahlan to state their case, make a technical request, or ask for guidance, they were often directed to one of the variety of officials who could handle the details of their concern.

A number of the people waiting in the long line of supplicants were representatives of distant lands who had come, usually dressed in ceremonial attire, not to ask for anything but simply to swear their loyalty to the newly formed D'Haran Empire. They all wanted to look their best at the banquets planned for later. Peace greased the wheels of trade. Being a willing and cooperative part of the empire made trade with all parts of the empire easier.

The man in the gold-embroidered robes showed no emotion as he waited for Richard's formal surrender.

"What are the proposed terms?" Richard asked out of curiosity, expecting some kind of diplomatic proposal that would turn out to be much less ominous-sounding and reveal what was really behind such an odd demand.

"There are no terms. The surrender must be unconditional."

Richard arched an eyebrow. That didn't sound like his idea of a diplomatic negotiation.

He sat up straighter. "What is your name?"

The man blinked, as if the question had been unexpected and totally irrelevant. For some reason he had difficulty looking directly at Richard. He averted his eyes whenever possible.

"My name has no bearing here and is unimportant in the matter before you," he said, confirming the bewildered expression on his face.

"Important or not, I would like to know your name."

Long bracelets dangled from the man's thick wrists as he spread his plump hands. His droopy eyes searched absently left and right, as if he didn't know what to do about the unexpected request. "I am only here with instructions to accept your surrender on behalf of my patron."

"Who is this patron?"

“The goddess.”

Richard was taken aback. He had heard of goddesses only in mythology. He didn’t think goddesses, in mythology anyway, hired professional diplomats.

“We are gathered here to address the issues of those who come before us. This ‘goddess’ is not here. You are.” The patience left Richard’s voice. “Give me your name.”

The man hesitated, avoiding looking directly at Richard. He picked up a long lock of gray hair that had fallen forward over his dark eyes and placed it back down over the bald top of his head. He licked his finger and then smoothed the lock down to paste it in place.

“If it will help ensure that you comply with the demand of the goddess, my name is Nolodondri, but I am known by Nolo.”

“Tell me, Nolo, why has this goddess not come in person to request the surrender of the D’Haran Empire?”

The man lifted the freshly licked finger to make a correction. “Not your empire, Lord Rahl, your world. And it is not a request. It is a command.”

“Ah. My world. I stand corrected. And it is a command, not a request. Duly noted.” Richard rolled his hand. “So you worship this goddess, do you?”

Nolo’s brow twitched. “No, not exactly.”

“What does that mean?”

“Would the sky expect the veneration of the ants on the ground beneath it?”

“Well then, why would this goddess send an ant to do her bidding instead of coming herself to make such a monumentally important demand?”

Nolo bowed his head slightly. “The goddess does not bother with petty tasks such as the surrender of worlds, so she directed me to come here to command compliance with her wishes.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Richard could see Kahlan’s aura darkening.

“You say that this was her ‘command’—that I surrender my world?”

Nolo bowed his head deeper, as if Richard were dense. “Yes, of course. I thought that I had made that clear.”

Cassia’s white leather creaked as she leaned in from behind Richard’s right shoulder to whisper to him. “Please, Lord Rahl,” she said as she pulled

her single blond braid forward over her shoulder as if holding her own leash, “I’m begging you. Let me kill him.”

Berdine, also in white leather, leaned in beside Cassia. “Lord Rahl, you left me here, unable to protect you, for ages. I think I deserve to be the one to kill him.”

“Maybe we can decide that later,” Richard said to them with a small smile. “For now, let me handle this?”

Both rolled their eyes as they straightened, but they released their Agiel, letting the weapons hang from their wrists on fine gold chains, always at the ready.

2

Richard was doing this public audience only because Kahlan had asked him to. She had told him that allowing people to come before the First Wizard with petitions or concerns was an ancient practice. She had in the past overseen the wizards' council as Mother Confessor in a time when there had been no First Wizard. Because of that experience, she'd said, she knew the good it did.

Richard had protested at first, saying that a wizards' council was a thing of the past, and besides, this was now the D'Haran Empire, not merely the Midlands.

She said that made it all the more important. She had argued that the need was not a thing of the past and that as the Lord Rahl, the leader of the D'Haran Empire and the new First Wizard, he was far more important than a wizards' council had ever been. She believed that because he held absolute rule people needed to know that it was fair and just rule. For that to happen they needed to be able to witness that rule firsthand. This was one way, she had told him, of letting people know that as part of the D'Haran Empire their voice would be heard and they would be treated fairly.

Richard had always found it difficult, if not impossible, to go against Kahlan's advice, especially since it was almost always sound advice. As the Mother Confessor, Kahlan knew a great deal more about the protocol of rule than he ever would.

While Richard was no longer a simple woods guide, Kahlan, too, was much more than the woman he had met in the Hartland woods that day so long ago. She was the Mother Confessor—the last Confessor. She'd held sway over the Midlands council, and thus the Midlands. Kings and queens trembled on bended knee before her. She knew about authority and rule.

They had fought a long and bitterly difficult war to finally bring peace to the world. In that struggle they had lost many dear friends and loved ones,

as had nearly everyone else. She and Richard were each the last of their kind, and together they were the hope of their world.

In the end he had known that Kahlan was right about holding such an event.

For three days they had been giving an audience to people who had traveled from far and wide to come before the Lord Rahl and the Mother Confessor with their concerns, or to see others do so. While he found it tedious and most of the matters achingly trivial, he realized that the people who had gathered to see it done found it not only exciting, but riveting and reassuring.

For those gathered, it was, in a way, a celebration of the end of wars, a joyous gathering with those who had saved their world and brought them peace, a time when rulers from far and wide came to swear their loyalty to the empire.

Richard just wanted it to be over so he could be alone with Kahlan.

While most people who had come before them were sincere, even if some stuttered in terror to be standing before the Lord Rahl and the Mother Confessor, this man, Nolo, was unlike the others. As far as Richard was concerned, he didn't seem to represent any real danger. Richard thought that maybe he was simply senile or possibly deranged in his old age. Richard noted, though, that Kahlan thought differently.

There were a great many people waiting for their turn to speak with them. This man had already wasted enough of their time with his nonsense, but worse, he had clearly upset Kahlan. Before Richard could say anything else, the man spoke again.

“Lord Rahl”—the Estorian’s voice turned harsh, losing the polish of polite diplomatic tolerance—“it would be in your own best interest if you surrendered your world without further delay. You can either do so voluntarily, thereupon to be executed in a humane fashion, or, should you refuse, you will be assassinated in a most brutal fashion.”

Richard leaned forward, put both forearms on the table, and folded his fingers together. With such a direct threat, especially after such hard-won peace, but especially against Kahlan, this man had just crossed a line.

Richard’s patience was at an end.

Many hundreds of people were crowded in on the main floor observing from each side of the petitioners who were waiting to be heard. Many more

watched from the balconies. All of them leaned forward in anticipation of what the Lord Rahl might say or do. This was a memorable event in their lives—the very stuff of legend—and it now held the distinct air of mortal peril.

He thought that most people expected a prompt beheading.

Richard was just about to instead ask the guards to escort the crazy old fool out of the People's Palace and see to it that he and the rest of the people with him never returned, when Kahlan touched his arm. She was staring directly at the Estorian diplomat as she spoke in a low voice to Richard.

“Do not dismiss this threat, Richard.”

Richard could see the aura around Kahlan snapping with faint, flickering flashes not unlike lightning dancing and crackling all across the haze of her aura. Since coming back from the underworld, he had found that he had access to his own inner power in ways he had never expected. One of those was that it gave him the ability to read Kahlan's aura, much the same as he had often been able to read the complex aura around a sorceress. But knowing Kahlan as well as he did, he didn't need to see her aura to know her mood.

He inclined his head toward her and spoke in a confidential tone while keeping his gaze on the chief diplomat from Estoria.

“I'm listening.”

She finally turned to direct her fiery green-eyed gaze and that hot aura at him.

“Let me question him. Alone.”

Richard hadn't expected that. “Don't you think we're getting a little ahead of ourselves, here?”

“No.” She leaned closer and lowered her voice to a heated whisper. “You need to listen to me in this, Richard. Estorians are diplomats. It's their nature, their very makeup. I've dealt with them many times and I've spent time in their land among the people there. They don't believe in conflict of any type as a solution to anything. They believe that any dispute must be resolved through diplomatic negotiation. They simply don't believe in absolutes nor do they make unconditional demands. There is no black and white to them. They exist in a gray world of diplomacy.

“I've never once seen an Estorian behave this way. Never. Something is very wrong. You need to listen to me in this. This man is dangerous. Let me

question him.”

It was an instruction, not a request.

Richard briefly glanced over at Nolo before looking back at Kahlan. What she was proposing, for all practical purposes, was nothing short of an execution, if not of his living form at least of his mind. Richard knew she was dead serious. Kahlan never used her power lightly or without being absolutely convinced of the need. But still...

“Kahlan, do you—”

“I know kings and queens and rulers of every kind and nearly every land. I’ve never once heard of a goddess. Have you? This man has just as good as declared war on behalf of someone unknown to us and made an open, public threat to our lives if we don’t unconditionally comply.”

Richard knew she was right. He had been trying to convince himself that because the demand was so preposterous the old man had to be insane, senile, or demented, but Kahlan was right. They could not let this pass, or allow people to see them let such a threat pass.

He turned a raptor gaze back on Nolo. That look alone caused the expansive room to break out in buzzing and worried whispers. It caused Nolo to avert his gaze.

Richard lifted a hand, wordlessly commanding silence.

“I am the Lord Rahl,” he said in a clear voice that carried back through the hall. “The D’Haran Empire is this world. They are one and the same. I rule the D’Haran Empire along with the Mother Confessor.”

Nolo couldn’t seem to help his amused smile. The fat folds of skin bunched under his chin as he bowed his partially bald head. “That is true for now,” he said as he looked up, “but you are a mere man, a ruler with no successor. Your rule is a dead lineage.” He gestured up at the marble medallion towering behind Richard and Kahlan. “You are the last of the Rahl line. She is the last Confessor. When you two die those bloodlines will die with you. Your kind and your rule are at an end.”

Kahlan slapped her hand down on the table. The sound made everyone jump as it echoed back through the hall.

She shot to her feet. “Enough!”

The room fell dead silent.

People had always been fearful of Confessors in general, and the Mother Confessor in particular. Seeing the Mother Confessor angry had them

giving ground as if driven back by a wave crashing to shore.

Kahlan swept an arm out, calling on the soldiers to the side.

“We will take this man to a room where we can have a private conversation.”

Everyone in the vast room knew exactly what that meant. This was to be an execution and it was to be at the hands of the Mother Confessor herself, not some hooded axeman.

Richard rose up beside her, adding his silent backing to her words.

He took up Kahlan’s hand and gave it a squeeze as if to ask if she was sure she wanted to do this.

She gave him a look of resolve he knew all too well. “After all we have fought for, Richard, all we have lost, you promised me that we were now entering a new golden age. I will not have anything take that golden age from all of us. This man has just threatened our lives. He has made himself an enemy of a peaceful future for everyone.”

“He could simply be an old man who has lost his mind and is imagining things,” Richard reminded her.

“He represents a threat to us, Richard—I can feel it in my bones. This is not a time to let down our guard. We need to know the nature of the threat. There is only one way to find out the truth with absolute certainty.”

Cassia leaned in close to them. “I will go with her, Lord Rahl, and protect her while she questions this fool who would think to threaten you both.”

Richard gave her a look. “Do you really think you want to be in the room when a Confessor unleashes her power?”

That gave the Mord-Sith pause. “She’s going to... Oh... Well then”—she straightened—“I will guard the room from outside in case she should need me.”

Kahlan, looking ready to go to war to stop a war before it could start, gestured to the guards.

“Bring him,” she growled.

3

The thick carpet muted Kahlan's footsteps as she marched down the private corridor. Cassia hurried to keep up. Behind the Mord-Sith a heavily armed detachment guarded the man in gold-embroidered robes as if he were the most dangerous man in the world.

As far as Kahlan was concerned, he was.

A muscular soldier to each side gripped Nolo under his flabby arms, virtually carrying him along. His footsteps only occasionally kissed the floor. He didn't struggle or protest his indignation at such rough treatment. In fact, he said nothing.

Kahlan needed a place where she could be alone with the Estorian. As angry as she was, if she ended up having to use her Confessor power it could be a danger to anyone too close. The men escorting her had simply followed her without question into the maze of the palace interior. Having been driven by her temper, she suddenly realized, she hadn't given any thought to where she was going, and she found that she didn't know where she was. She stopped and turned back to the soldiers.

"I need a private room where I won't be disturbed. Do you know of one nearby?"

The guard immediately behind the two carrying Nolo lowered his pike to point with it past them to the right. "Take that hallway, Mother Confessor."

"Then where?"

He hesitated, briefly considering the directions, then changed his mind. "It would be easier if I just showed you."

Kahlan gestured for the man to take the lead. He hurried past them down the white-plastered hallway and then through several more turns that eventually led them to an expansive, round entryway elaborately detailed with moldings and raised panels all painted a creamy white. While pleasant enough, it had a sterile feel to it. In that broad entryway there was but a

single room. It had a heavy oak door with iron strap hinges that, oddly enough, could be bolted from the outside.

The round entryway where they all gathered was easily large enough to hold several times their number. Black and white marble had been laid out to create a spiral design on the floor. At the center of the spiral sat a round mahogany table with five carved stone mountain lions for legs. A beautiful pale blue blown-glass vase, apparently meant for cut flowers, rested at the center of the table, but it was empty.

Kahlan had never been in this area of the palace before. But that wasn't saying much, since it could take hours to walk from one end of the palace to the other. The palace was really a small city atop the plateau and home to thousands of people. There were public areas and service areas as well as areas and corridors that were for the exclusive use of the Lord Rahl, the master of the People's Palace and leader of D'Hara. The soldiers and the Mord-Sith used all areas in their duty to protect and serve the Lord Rahl. The service halls were guarded, but the private areas were heavily guarded, all by the elite members of the First File, the Lord Rahl's personal guard.

The soldier who had led them there tipped his lance to indicate the door. "This room is at the outer wall of the palace and is unoccupied, Mother Confessor."

"How do you know about it?"

He blinked at the question, as if surprised she doubted his knowledge of the palace. "All members of the First File must learn not only the layout of the People's Palace, but its security secrets. In times past the Lord Rahl would hold court in the great hall—the same one being used by you and Lord Rahl today. When a past Lord Rahl, Darken Rahl especially, didn't want a visitor to leave, this room was nearby and one he relied on."

"It's a prison cell, then?"

"Yes, although a comfortable one as prisons go. It's meant for higher-ranking people or dignitaries the Lord Rahl wanted held temporarily."

"Until they were executed?"

The soldier smiled. "Usually, Mother Confessor."

She marveled at how, despite all the changes, some things hadn't altered.

Kahlan didn't need to think it over. "It should do."

The soldier opened the door for her. When she extended an arm in invitation, the two soldiers holding the heavy Nolo lugged him in ahead of

her. One of the other men lit a long splinter on one of the dozen reflector lamps in the expansive entryway, then lit the lamps on the walls and small bedside table within.

As the lamps were lit one by one they gradually revealed a rather small room that, without windows, ordinarily existed in total darkness. The walls were made up entirely of limestone blocks. Heavy beams held up the plank ceiling. There was minimal furniture, the largest piece being a simple, unpainted pine wardrobe. Several reflector lamps on the walls as well as the one on a bedside table now provided plenty of light, as well as an oily smell.

Kahlan looked more closely and saw that messages had been scratched into the soft limestone walls. The few she took the time to read were prayers for salvation.

“Leave him,” she said to the men holding the Estorian. “Then I want you all to go back and protect Richard.”

The two men holding him finally let Nolo’s feet find traction on the floor. They were clearly reluctant to leave her alone with the man. Kahlan knew something was seriously wrong, but she was in no danger from a lone man. She was more concerned about the shapeless threat to Richard and the people in the great hall. Anything could happen.

Nolo had promised that she and Richard would be executed or assassinated. With all the private corridors heavily guarded to make sure that none of the thousands of guests slipped into them, no one could get to the private area where Kahlan was.

“I’m not so confident that would be what Lord Rahl would want, Mother Confessor,” the bearded commander said. “I think he would want us to protect you.”

“You’re right about that, but I’m not in danger from a single man,” she assured them. “You men know that, and no one else is going to get into this area. Richard has a great hall full of people all around him. For all we know, this man here could have brought assassins with him to carry out his promise. They could be anywhere among the gathered crowd. Richard is the one in danger at the moment. He must be protected. He is the Lord Rahl. He is everything to all of us.”

That spread alarmed looks among the soldiers. “Do you really think that this man brought assassins with him who could be planning to strike in the

great hall, Mother Confessor?"

"Can you assure me there aren't, and that my husband does not need more eyes watching over and protecting him?"

When none of them could offer any such assurance, she said, "Please see to my orders."

These men knew her. They'd fought beside her. They didn't need convincing.

After saluting with fists to their hearts, they left with new concern for possible trouble in the palace.

"You too," Kahlan told Cassia, shooing her with a flick of her hand. Kahlan paused to point a finger back at Nolo when he started to follow. "You stay right where you are."

The man didn't look angry, curious, or the least bit afraid. He stopped where he was and waited.

Cassia hesitated. "I promised Lord Rahl that I would watch over you."

"You can watch over me from the other side of that door," Kahlan told the Mord-Sith.

"But I—"

"I would advise that you stand on the other side of the entryway, or better yet stay back a ways down the hallway. I wouldn't want you to be hurt."

While Cassia certainly did want to watch over Kahlan, she had also volunteered to watch over Richard's beloved wife, a task of honor, but one that carried great responsibility. Even so, she knew the very real danger of a Confessor's power to a Mord-Sith. She couldn't protect Kahlan if she was unconscious.

"All right, Mother Confessor," Cassia said as she cast a last glance at the man standing not far away.

Kahlan followed her to the heavy door and then, once she was out, drove the heavy iron bolt into place to make sure the Mord-Sith stayed on the other side. She didn't want anyone interrupting her. Nolo waited calmly.

Kahlan had visited Estoria a few times, as had Confessors before her. Estorians were familiar with Confessors and their power. Like everyone else in the Midlands, they feared Confessors.

This man did not look afraid.

He should have.

"I believe you are the consul general?"

He bowed his head at being recognized. “We met once, years ago when I was in the diplomatic service. You were young, and not yet the beautiful woman you have become. You were with one of your sister Confessors at the time.”

All of Kahlan’s sister Confessors were long dead. She didn’t want to ask which of the other Confessors it had been for fear of it dredging up painful memories of those who had died horrific deaths at the hands of Darken Rahl. Kahlan was the last of the Confessors... and ironically enough now the wife of Darken Rahl’s son. Fortunately, the two men could hardly be more different.

“On whose behalf are you here to negotiate?”

His brow twitched. “I thought I had made myself clear. There is nothing to negotiate. You and your husband are to surrender your world unconditionally, at which time you will be humanely executed. Fail to follow those orders and you both will be brutally killed.”

Kahlan heaved a weary sigh. “To whom are we to surrender ‘our world’?”

“The goddess. I told you that.”

“That tells me nothing at all. I don’t know any goddess. Who is she?”

“She is the Golden Goddess,” Nolo said.

That froze Kahlan in place. It was a long moment before she could find her voice.

“What does this Golden Goddess want with our world?”

“She is a collector of worlds.”

Kahlan could only stare at the man.

“Where is she,” she finally asked. “What land?”

Nolo looked a bit confused. “She is the Golden Goddess.” His confusion turned to a glare. “She must be obeyed.”

Kahlan pinched the bridge of her nose in annoyance. Nolo was going around in circles. Diplomats, and the consul general of Estoria in particular, were experts at obfuscation. Kahlan wasn’t having any of it.

“I need a great deal more information than that. You need to explain this whole thing to me. All of it.”

Nolo shrugged, as if perplexed. “I have told you everything you need to know, Mother Confessor. There is nothing more to tell or anything more

you need to know. You have the command from the Golden Goddess and you must comply.”

Kahlan showed him a humorless smile. “I’m afraid that there is a whole lot more I need to know, and one way or another you are going to tell me.”

He looked mildly amused. “I’m afraid you fail to understand your position.”

Kahlan’s smile, as humorless as it had been, left. “What, exactly, do I fail to understand?”

“The Golden Goddess is going to have your world.”

“Yes, you’ve already said that. But there is no force left powerful enough to challenge the peace that the D’Haran Empire has brought to the world. Wars that had burned for thousands of years have been ended. Lord Rahl ended them. There is no one left strong enough to challenge the empire or his rule.”

“Yes, but what you fail to understand, Mother Confessor, is just how fragile that empire really is. You and Lord Rahl are the power that holds the empire’s might together. Without you both, the empire—your world—crumbles. The Golden Goddess has merely to wait for you both to die, of old age if nothing else. So you see, should you both manage to somehow survive, the Golden Goddess will have this world in the end, one way or another.

“She would prefer not to wait for your eventual death, so she wants you both to surrender your world now. You can’t win in this. It is time you recognize that and surrender.”

“What the Golden Goddess fails to understand is that the House of Rahl has stood for thousands of years. It will continue to stand and to rule.”

Nolo looked even more amused. “I think not. But I have an alternative for you, although not for Lord Rahl.”

“Are you making a proposal of some kind?”

He showed her a devious smile. “Yes, a proposal. I would like to put forward a private negotiation just between you and me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Lord Rahl is not the only one at the dead end of his lineage. You are the last Confessor, the last of your line.”

Kahlan folded her arms and peered down at him, but didn’t answer. The line of Confessors was none of this man’s business.

“You have been with Richard Rahl for what—years, now?”

“If you have a point, you had better get to it soon.”

“The point, Mother Confessor, is that Richard Rahl has failed in his duty as a man.”

She frowned. “What in the world are you talking about?”

“He has failed in all this time to give you a child to carry on not only the Rahl line, but the Confessor line as well. In all the times you have given your body to him, he has failed to put you with child. He is not a real man. He is weak, and his seed is obviously worthless. Your empire is on the verge of crumbling because of that and you don’t even realize it.”

Kahlan had been pregnant before, but had been severely beaten and as a result lost the baby. That was none of this man’s business.

Nolo twirled a hand in the air, making his false chins jiggle. “In all this time he has failed to continue the Rahl line, and now his inability to father a child also threatens to be the end of the Confessor line as well. So you see, Mother Confessor, what you need—if you are to carry on the line of the Confessors—is a man who can give you a child.”

He abruptly pumped his hips toward her in a lewd fashion, leaving no doubt as to what he meant. “I am here to negotiate for the service you need to continue your line. I am here to offer you my seed so you may conceive.”

Kahlan’s arms came unfolded in disbelief as her fists dropped to her sides. She thought that Richard must be right—this man was simply deranged.

“Even if I did need someone else to father a child,” she said, her anger driving her to ask, “what in the world makes you think for a second that I would pick you?”

An arrogant smile further plumped his already plump cheeks. “I think you would be wise to select me for this task because I could negotiate with the goddess to allow you to live.” He flicked a hand dismissively. “Lord Rahl, of course, would have to die.”

“Is this what your goddess suggested?”

“No, of course not. This is simply my idea of sparing you the suffering that is to come if you don’t agree to her terms. A way out, if you will, for yourself. I might be able to see to it that you could live to raise your Confessor child—the child I sire.”

“You must be out of your mind,” Kahlan said. “I would die first.”

“That’s hardly a wise negotiating position.”

“There is nothing to negotiate.” At the end of her patience, Kahlan gritted her teeth. “It is the threat from your goddess we are here to discuss, and nothing else. I have heard enough of your own nonsense and I will hear no more of it.

“Surely you must realize that, as a Confessor, I am going to insist on your cooperation in telling me everything you know about this Golden Goddess. This is not a negotiation, Consul General. You will not leave this room alive unless you tell me every bit of what you know.”

He paced off a few steps, then turned back. “You are correct, Mother Confessor... in that one of us is not going to leave this room alive. You have made a foolish mistake in turning down my generous offer to negotiate on your behalf to spare your life. Since I am the only one who could have helped you and you are turning me down, you have sealed your fate.

“You are the one who will not leave this room alive.”

Kahlan had a hard time believing that an Estorian would make such an open threat.

She believed it when he pulled a knife from a sheath at his waist under his cloak.

He charged toward her with the knife.

As he came crashing in on her, Kahlan thrust her hand out, her palm turned up.

It may have all seemed lightning fast to him, seemed that he had the advantage—but not to Kahlan. She had known that he had the knife and had let him keep it to see if he would dare to try to use it. Even with a knife and even had he been more agile and a great deal faster, he still would have had no chance against a Confessor. None.

But in the attempt, he had erased her last shred of doubt and sealed his own fate.

As the very tip of the razor-sharp blade touched the palm of her upturned hand, her Confessor power had already slammed time to a stop.

The tip of that blade felt less than a feather touching her palm.

Time was hers, now.

This man was hers, now.

While some of the other Confessors had needed to deliberately invoke their power, Kahlan never had. Her birthright was always there deep inside

her, a coiled fury that had to be continually restrained rather than occasionally summoned. She had always had to tightly contain it lest it slip its bonds unintentionally. To use it, she had only to withdraw that restraint. It all happened in an infinitesimal glimmer of an instant.

This man had condemned himself when he pulled a knife intending to kill her. Worse than that, in her eyes, he had threatened Richard's life as well as the lives of all the people she and Richard protected.

She no longer saw the consul general, or even a man.

This was the embodiment of a shapeless enemy come to destroy their world—her world. This was the face of evil.

There would be no mercy.

If he recognized what was about to happen, he didn't show it. All she saw in his dark eyes was the twisted hate of his determined, lethal intent. She no longer felt anger, nor was there any sorrow for what she was about to do to this man. As angry as she had been at him moments before, as her power ignited all emotion vanished, replaced by an overwhelming void, a space between thought, between feeling, between instants.

Time was hers.

Frozen there before her, she saw every bead of sweat on his brow and the bald top of his head. She had enough time to have counted those droplets. If she had wanted to, she could have counted all the whiskers on his face.

She had an eternity of time as the full fury of her will came to life.

It was breathtaking, intoxicating, as if her entire being were being sucked into that avalanche of power as it crashed into the man thrusting his knife toward her.

Thunder without sound jolted the air... exquisite, violent, and for that pristine instant, sovereign.

4

“What do you think it could mean, Lord Rahl?” the gravedigger asked.

As he wrung his hands, his head hunched down into his shoulders with the anxiety of standing before the Lord Rahl as well as an array of officials and so many soldiers and spectators. Richard could see that the man’s fingernails were permanently stained with the dirt he worked in every day, but more so from the dead bodies he routinely handled.

“How often has this happened?” Richard asked.

“Several times,” the man said, suddenly becoming animated as he gestured with the hand holding his battered old hat. “The dead animals were found on all the graves twice last month alone. People are frightened.”

“What kind of animals?” Richard asked.

The gravedigger spread his hands with a shrug. “All sorts of animals, Lord Rahl. Raccoons, a few foxes, cats, dogs, squirrels, chipmunks, pigeons, starlings, an owl, and other sorts of birds. Even some fish. All manner of animals. Some looked fresh dead, and some looked long dead, with everything else in between. Some still warm, some barely more than bones inside scraps of hide, some writhing with maggots. It has the entire town upset and they expect an answer from me as I have been entrusted to care for the graves of their loved ones, but I have no answer for them.”

As the gravedigger was talking, Richard spotted a woman in among the petitioners pushing her way forward through the spellbound crowd as they waited to hear what the Lord Rahl would have to say about the alarming mystery of dead animals found on graves. People grumbled irritably but moved aside as the woman pushed them out of her way.

The statuesque woman looked to be no older than Richard. She had long, straight dark hair, parted in the middle, and the kind of achingly feminine features that could easily melt men’s hearts, or just as easily turn intimidating enough to make them stutter. This was a woman who appeared

to brook no one questioning her authority to do as she pleased, a woman who expected her orders to be followed without question.

While she was distinctively dressed, it wasn't the kind of attire worn by nobility. It had more the look of practical yet alluring traveling clothes. The black cloak draped over her shoulders was held together at the top with bone buttons connected by a short silver chain. The black dress beneath the black cloak revealed a figure that had all the men gaping at her. It looked like she was used to ignoring such looks.

As she finally made her way to the front of the petitioners, a soldier to each side stepped up in front of her, to stop her from coming any closer and interrupting as well as to remind her to wait her turn.

Without so much as a glance at the soldiers, the woman put a finger to their shoulders, first one and then the other. The soldiers' eyes rolled up as they crumpled to the ground at her feet. She stepped over them without missing a stride as she continued forward.

Richard lifted the finger of each hand resting on the table to signal the guards to each side not to interfere. This was a situation he needed to handle or it could get ugly.

The gravedigger still hadn't seen the graceful creature approaching from behind. "So what do you think, Lord Rahl? What do you think could be the cause of all those dead animals found on graves?"

The woman gently pushed the gravedigger aside. "Have you considered that maybe some boys are playing pranks?" she said to him.

The gravedigger suddenly saw her and shrank away.

Richard couldn't help smiling. That was what he had been about to say.

The woman had the strangest aura radiating around her. It had some elements he recognized and others he'd never seen before. Even had he not been able to see her aura, though, he could have told by her bearing alone that this was not a woman to be trifled with.

She opened the gate without invitation and stepped inside the railing.

"I have come a long way to see you, Lord Rahl. I did not realize that once I got here I would find that you are an idiot."

Those close enough to have heard her gasped.

Richard came to his feet as the woman boldly strode up the three steps onto the broad platform.

“What have you done to my men? If you’ve harmed them, you are going to find yourself in a great deal of trouble.”

She glanced briefly over her shoulder to see the men still crumpled, unmoving, on the floor. She dismissed it with a flick of a hand. “They are merely asleep. No harm has come to them.”

“How can I be sure of that?”

She made a face at the fuss and then snapped her fingers. The men suddenly woke, rubbing their eyes as if groggy. They realized where they were and quickly scrambled to their feet, looking embarrassed but no worse for wear.

“See?” she asked. “I don’t lie.”

Richard leveled a glare on her. “And who might you be?”

She waved the hand again, this time as if to say she was sorry to have forgotten to introduce herself.

“My name is Shale.”

“And where have you traveled this great distance from?”

She flicked the hand back over her shoulder. “I come from the Northern Waste.”

Richard had never heard of the Northern Waste. “Does it snow a lot in the Northern Waste?”

Curiosity creased her smooth brow. “Of course. That, among other reasons, is why it is called the Waste.”

Richard gestured to her dark clothing. “Don’t you kind of stand out in the snow?”

“Stand out... ?” She looked down at herself and suddenly understood his meaning. She looked unexpectedly amused. The look flattered her features. “I see what you mean.”

She lifted her arms and then turned her hands palm up while letting her hands gracefully glide down beside the length of her to her hips. As her hands descended, her hair remained the same dark color, but her outfit transformed from black to white, making her look like some sort of mythical snow queen.

“There. Better?”

The crowd gasped and buzzed at the sight. First a threat of assassination, and now this display of magic. It was proving to be the kind of exciting day they had come hoping for.

Richard now knew at least some of what he was dealing with and what it was about her aura that had puzzled him.

He crooked two fingers, motioning for her to approach so that he could talk to her privately without the gathered throng hearing them. Only the five remaining Mord-Sith were close behind him, all in white leather except Vika, who was in red.

Shale didn't seem the least bit intimidated by the Mord-Sith as she came right up against the opposite side of the heavy table. Had the table not been there he suspected she would have come close enough to dance with him. Whatever else she was, this woman was not shy.

"You have made a poor first impression, Shale," he told her.

She blinked in surprise at someone being so blunt with her. It was obvious she was not at all used to anyone taking that tone with her. Her gaze fell away as she blushed.

"I apologize, Lord Rahl," she said after a moment. "One of my bad habits." She bowed her head. "If it pleases you, may I start over?"

"I tend to share that same bad habit," Richard said with a small smile. "Why don't you tell me why you're here, and what's so urgent that you would come up out of turn?"

She took a breath to settle herself before beginning. "As I said, I come from the Northern Waste. It's a barren land far from here, a harsh place to live, but there are those who live there, many like me because they were born there and it's all they know. Others because they feel lost in the world and so they want to become lost in the Waste. It's a harsh place to live, and a harsher place to die."

"And you are their leader? Their queen or something?"

She blushed again. "I don't have so important a title. I... watch over them. They think of me as their shepherd, I guess you could say. I have no title as such. I am simply known as Shale. For the people in the Northern Waste, that name is title enough."

He imagined it was. By the undulating, crackling look of her aura, he was sure it was.

"I think you are more than simply 'Shale'. You are a witch woman?"

She lifted her chin, looking a little startled. "Yes and no."

"What does that mean?"

“My mother was a witch woman, but my father was a wizard. That combination made me a bit of both. I am a sorceress—with the gift from my father’s side—and a witch woman from my mother. I am told that such a combination makes me... unique.”

That explained the aura. “Each of us is unique in our own way,” Richard said.

Her brow bunched as she peered at him. “What an odd thing to say.”

“Not so odd. Please go on.”

“For some reason my parentage makes me adept at healing, among other things. The people of the Northern Waste depend on me for that ability, among those other things, when in dire circumstances.”

“So why have you come here?”

“The Waste is a forgotten place, but it does have its advantages. When there were cruel rulers in the past, such as Darken Rahl, living in a forgotten place was not such a bad thing. With men like Darken Rahl in power, some would say it was a blessing. Men like Darken Rahl would have eliminated a woman like me.”

“Or enslaved you.”

“Could be. Men of power don’t tend to like others with brains and ability. Especially women. I heard it said during the great war that you were different. And now word of the war ending has finally reached us. Word of a peace under the D’Haran Empire is welcome news.

“I have come to offer the loyalty of the Northern Waste to the Lord Rahl and the D’Haran Empire.”

Richard bowed his head. “Thank you.”

“But now that I am here,” she said, her brow drawing down again as her voice took on a dark edge, “I find the new Lord Rahl is an idiot.”

All the Mord-Sith flicked their Agiel up into their fists.

Shale noted it with indifference.

Vika, in her red leather, leaned in on Richard’s left side to point her Agiel at the woman on the other side of the heavy table. “I indulged you the first time you said that. I will not allow the second time to pass.”

Richard put his left arm out to stop Vika from launching over the table at Shale. “Let me handle this.” He gave the angry Mord-Sith a patient look. “Please?”

Vika finally relented and moved back, but not as far as before, and she didn't drop her Agiel.

"I can let insults pass as they are merely words, but I would like to know the reason for it."

Shale put her fists on the table and leaned in toward him.

"What did that fat pig in white robes tell you?"

"Some crazy nonsense about wanting us to surrender our world."

"Didn't I also hear him say that you are the last of the Rahl line, and that your wife is the last Confessor, and that when you two die his goddess will then have our world?"

"Yes, that's right. What of it?"

Her expression hardened. "In other words, for this goddess to take over our world, your line must end, the Mother Confessor's line must end. You must die. Your wife must die. That man said as much, either by execution or assassination."

Richard nodded. "That's the gist of it."

"He said your wife needs to die," Shale repeated carefully as she cocked her head. "And you let her be alone with him?"

Richard stared at Shale a moment. He blinked.

"I'm an idiot."

"Nice to know we agree."

Just then, Cassia raced into the room, vaulted over the railing without missing a beat, and bounded up the steps to the raised area with the table. She gulped air, trying to catch her breath enough to talk.

"Lord Rahl! You have to come quick! Something happened! Something bad!"

5

Richard charged through the hallways and corridors behind a frantic Cassia toward the room where Kahlan had taken Nolo for questioning—a place where she could use her Confessor power without having to worry about hurting anyone else.

A lone man had never been a threat to Kahlan. Rather, her Confessor power made her an overwhelming threat to him. Richard couldn't imagine what could have gone wrong. Whatever had happened, he didn't want to waste time questioning Cassia—

He just wanted to get to Kahlan.

When Richard had raced out of the great hall, Shale had followed close on his heels. The rest of the Mord-Sith ran in a cluster behind them. Behind the Mord-Sith a large force of men of the First File flooded through the narrow halls and wide passageways like a raging torrent of dark water. All their weapons hanging from belts filled the halls with a metallic jangle.

As they abruptly spilled into a round entrance hall that was painted white, Cassia slid to a stop on the polished black and white marble floor.

“Here, Lord Rahl! This is where they are.” Cassia frantically shook her hand toward a heavy oak door, then raced around a table with stone mountain lions for legs. “In here! I tried hard as I could but I couldn’t get the door open.”

Richard could hear eerie shrieks and howls coming from the other side of the door.

“Why is this door bolted on the outside?” he yelled at Cassia as he slammed the bolt back out of the way.

“It—it wasn’t, Lord Rahl,” she stammered in surprise. “I swear. We never bolted the door. As I stood guard, everything suddenly shook like lightning had hit the palace, but there was no sound of thunder. Then I heard screams and howling. One of those screams was from the Mother Confessor.

“I tried frantically to open the door to help her, but I couldn’t. Maybe the door was bolted from the other side as well, I don’t know, but this side was not bolted when I came to get you, I swear.”

Richard tried to open the door as she was talking, but it wouldn’t budge. After slamming into it with his shoulder twice, he knew it was too big and heavy, and with its massive metal strap hinges they were not going to simply break it down. Howls were still coming from the other side.

Driven by urgent need, Richard’s right hand went to the hilt of his sword at his left hip. The rage from the sword was already rising to meet his. Those twin furies, his and the sword’s, spiraled together into a storm of lethal power.

In a near trance of rage, their power joined, Richard drew the sword. The steel, with its dark metallic gleam from having been touched by the world of the dead, rang out as it cleared the scabbard and emerged into the air for the first time in what seemed ages. That singular, deadly sound echoed through the hallways and corridors.

Richard had thought that it would be a long time before he ever needed to draw this ancient weapon again. As had so often happened, that time had come sooner than he expected, but in a way, it was profoundly gratifying to be joined with the sword’s magic once more, to know that it was still there, to feel it rise to his call.

With a cry of fury, holding the weapon in both hands, Richard unleashed a mighty swing. The tip of the blade whistled as it arced through the air. The sword cut an explosive swath through both the massive oak door and the stone walls to either side as if they were no more than mere gossamer. In the relatively confined space, the sound of rock and oak shattering was deafening. Chips of stone, both large and small, as well as a shower of oak splinters, rained down on everyone. The table was covered in crumbles of stone debris. One of the broken iron strap hinges skittered off down the hallway.

As large stone blocks tumbled across the black and white marble floor, the top half of the door let out a groan and then dropped heavily to the ground with a loud thud. Richard kicked over the bottom half and dove sword-first through the billowing dust into darkness.

The room was dark as pitch, with only the meager light of the reflector lamps on the walls in the outer room spilling in through the blasted opening

to light a small area of the floor directly inside. It wasn't much.

In that weak light, Richard saw the Estorian at the end of the room to the left, racing back and forth, crashing into one wall only to rebound and race toward the other, where he leaped up, landed his feet on the stone wall, then bounded back to crash a shoulder into the opposite wall. Back and forth he went at a frantic pace, screaming, howling, and shrieking the whole time. Richard could hardly believe that the rotund man could move with such speed and power.

In between the howls and smacking into walls, the battered Nolo paused briefly to throw his head back and bark like a dog. He seemed oblivious to anyone else being in the room. A mask of blood from crashing into the stone walls covered his face. A large scrap of scalp hung down, exposing bone. Blood ran in rivulets down around his ear. His once-white robes were now wet and red.

All of his wounds and broken bones didn't seem to bother him or slow him down in the least. He was apparently being driven by some frantic internal need. With his head split open and all the blood he had lost, it was a wonder he was still conscious, much less alive.

Richard frantically peered around the room, trying to see in the dusty darkness.

"Get some light in here!" he yelled back out through the ravaged doorway at the soldiers.

As he did, other big men ran in to capture the howling consul general. Four of them tackled him. Despite their combined weight and strength, they had trouble controlling him. In his frenzy he pushed all four men back, their feet sliding on the floor. They pounced again. With a howl from Nolo, the whole lot of them tumbled to the floor. The man's arms flailed as he struggled to get free of all the powerful men grappling with him.

Shale rushed into the chaos and squatted, squeezing herself in between the soldiers struggling to hold the howling man down. She placed her hand, her fingers spread, over his face. He shook violently beneath it. He froze abruptly, blinked, and then his eyes rolled up in his head. He finally slumped into an unconscious heap.

Men with torches finally raced into the gloomy room, providing light, but the dust swirling around in the air still drastically cut the visibility. In the illumination provided by the sputtering flames of the torches, Richard was

able to see that most of the furniture in the room had been smashed. Splinters from the broken furniture lay scattered all over the floor. A table on its side and a badly misshapen wardrobe were the only things mostly intact.

Richard could see light leaking in through cracks in the outer wall where some of the limestone blocks had been displaced. Those cracks allowed slivers of daylight to show through from outside. Kahlan's power unleashed in such a confined space had apparently buckled the blocks outward. She must have unleashed everything she had to have nearly blown out the stone walls.

Richard hunted frantically through the dusty darkness, upending the table that lay on its side, flipping over a tented rug, kicking a night table out of his way, searching. He finally spotted Kahlan in a far corner on the opposite side of the room to the right, behind the broken, overturned wardrobe. In the murky light he couldn't tell if she was all right, or hurt, or even alive.

Richard grabbed a stubby leg of the wardrobe and heaved it back out of his way as he dove in close and knelt down in front of Kahlan. The wardrobe crashed to the ground and broke apart. The Mord-Sith rifled through the murky darkness, looking for any sign of threat.

Slumped back in the corner, Kahlan stared blankly out at nothing. Tears ran down her cheeks as she panted in pain. Men with torches came in close behind Richard to provide more light.

The left sleeve of Kahlan's dress had been completely torn off at the top of her shoulder. There were three long, deep claw marks starting at her shoulder and running down her arm to the bend in her elbow. The muscle had been laid open down to bone. Nolo wouldn't have been able to do that. It looked more like she had been mauled by a bear. As horrific as it looked, it at least didn't appear to have torn open an artery.

Richard, his heart hammering, fought his rising sense of panic as he saw, then, that there was a knife, its handle covered in blood like her white dress, buried to the hilt in the upper left side of her chest, near the top of her breast. There was also a deep, slashing knife wound across the right side of her rib cage from her armpit to her abdomen. The tatters of her dress, soaked with blood, were no longer remotely white. The gash had been deeply sliced open, the knife leaving nicks in each rib it crossed. There was so much blood he couldn't tell what other injuries she might have.

Kahlan was shaking and panting uncontrollably.

“It’s all right, Kahlan. I’m here,” he said as he gently pulled her toward him with his arm, sitting her up a little, holding her head to his shoulder while in one swift pull he yanked the knife out of her chest then quickly pressed his hand over her breast as he let his gift begin to flow into the wound to staunch the heavy flow of blood.

She let out a sob of pain.

“It’s all right. I’ve got you.”

“Did you see him?” she asked in a quavering voice as he laid her back. “Did you see him?”

“See who?” he asked as he was busy lifting parts of her torn dress aside to appraise her other wounds.

When she didn’t answer, he looked up. She was staring off at nothing.

“See who?” he asked again.

She suddenly looked back at him, gripped his shirt at his throat in her good hand, and pulled herself close. Her green eyes were wild.

“The scribbly man... did you see him?”

Richard didn’t have a clue what she was talking about, and right then and there it didn’t really matter to him. No one had come out of the room, and he knew for a fact that there was no one else in there with them besides Nolo, soldiers, Mord-Sith, and Shale. She was probably delirious from loss of blood.

Shale knelt in beside Richard to help. Vika grabbed her arm to pull her back away.

Richard seized Vika’s wrist. “Leave her be,” he growled. “If not for Shale we wouldn’t have gotten here in time to save Kahlan’s life.”

Vika nodded then, realizing he was right, and released her grip on Shale. “Sorry.”

Shale quickly nodded, as if to say she understood how protective the Mord-Sith were.

Richard frowned, deep in concentration. “I’m stopping the bleeding from this stab wound... but I can feel something more than her wounds.”

Shale pressed her hands to each side of Kahlan’s head and closed her eyes, as if trying to discern what he was feeling.

“You need to stop what you’re doing,” she said with sudden urgency.

“What? She’ll bleed to death!”

“No, you’ve already stopped the bleeding. Your gift is causing her pain.”

“Healing causes pain as you lift their injury,” he said. “I’ve healed her before when she’d been terribly wounded. I’ve done it before and I can do it again.”

“Ordinarily you would be right. This is different.” Shale seized his wrist and forcefully pulled his hand back. “Lord Rahl, you will make it worse if you do it that way.”

“What do you mean, that way? I told you, I’ve healed her before. Healing is healing.”

“Not this time,” she said in a distracted tone. “You need to let me do this if we are to save her life. What you are doing will kill her.” She looked up at him with frantic concern. “If you don’t let me do this, she is going to die!”

Richard hesitated, then sat back up. “Maybe together we can—”

“No. You need to listen to me.” Shale shot him a quick frown honed by years of authority. “I know you want more than anything to help, but trust me, in this case your gift will only make it worse.

“Why don’t you go heal that lunatic? I’m sure you are going to want to question him about what happened in here. You can’t question him if he dies. Right now he is our only link to what is happening and he is in bad shape. He didn’t leave these claw marks. We need to know what did.”

Richard felt sick seeing the bone in her arm where the meat was laid back. Even the white bone had long gouge marks down it. He ran his fingers through his hair as he sat back on his heels.

Shale obviously knew what she was doing, even if he wasn’t at all happy about not being able to help.

Holding the sides of Kahlan’s head, Shale used her thumbs to gently close her eyes. It was somehow less frightening seeing Kahlan with her eyes closed. When they were opened, he could see the terror.

Richard didn’t know what she had seen, but it was clear how much it had frightened her. Kahlan was not easily shaken, but she was now.

Once her eyes were closed, her panting slowed to even breathing, though it was ragged with stitches of pain. Leaving Shale to work on Kahlan, Richard reluctantly turned to seeing about the unconscious Nolo. He wasn’t really interested in saving Nolo’s life, but Shale was right about their need

to question him. Something other than Nolo had attacked Kahlan, and they needed to know what it was.

Questioning the man had been what Kahlan had been trying to do with her Confessor ability. Richard had seen her use her power since the first day he'd met her. It was as profound a use of the gift as he had ever seen. There was nothing that could stand up against it... as long as what it was being used on was human. He couldn't imagine what had gone wrong this time.

The soldiers stepped back out of his way as Richard placed the flat of his hand over the bleeding head wound to make sure the skull wasn't cracked. He found that it was. He released a flow of healing power through his gift. He wasn't careful about being gentle with how he did it. He didn't care how much it hurt the man, only that he lived. He forced bone together to close the crack and stop the loss of blood and fluid.

Even so, lifting such a severe injury from anyone was not only difficult, but caused agony to the one doing the healing. The more severe the injury or sickness, the greater the pain.

He knew that Shale would be in far greater pain taking the agony of Kahlan's wounds into herself in order to heal her.

Richard was so concerned about Kahlan that he endured the stress of healing the man's cracked skull almost without noticing the suffering he took into himself. Once he had the underlying structure repaired, he replaced the flap of scalp, placed a hand over it, and sent a flow of his gift into the wound.

Richard found that the man had several broken ribs, a broken collarbone, and a broken wrist. The ribs were relatively easy to mend with his gift, but the wrist was unexpectedly complex to heal. It had to be done in layers, bone by bone, until everything was back in place and the wrist moved as it should.

By the time Richard had finished and finally stood, his face was covered with a sheen of sweat. Nolo would still be unconscious for a time, but at least he wasn't going to die.

"Take him to the dungeon," he told the soldiers. "Put him in restraints so he can't hurt himself. It was a lot of work healing him. I don't want him splitting his head open again. I'm going to want to question him and I want him to be able to give me answers."

The soldiers all clapped fists to hearts before bending to the task. Even with four men, one on each arm and each leg, it was difficult to lug the dead weight of the heavy man out of the room.

Richard turned his attention back to Kahlan just as Shale stood. She gripped Richard's arm as he came close.

"It's all right, Lord Rahl. I've put her into a deep, healing sleep. The worst of the danger is past. I think she will be fine, but I've only pulled wounds together to stabilize her until we can get her to her room, where I can finish the work."

Richard nodded. "What about those three gouges down her arm?"

"I closed them as best I could for now, but her injuries are going to take a great deal more work to set everything right. I will need to fix the underlying layers so that her arm will work properly. I will need to work further down into the stab wound in her chest. Fortunately, while it did severe damage, it didn't cut her heart and kill her. It can all be healed."

Richard stared down at Kahlan. "What do you think did that—left those gouges down her arm?"

Shale hesitated. "What I can tell you is that Nolo didn't make them." She looked back down at Kahlan. "We should get her out of here and to bed. She needs to be cleaned up and I need to continue my work."

Richard bent down and carefully scooped Kahlan up in his arms. He didn't want anyone else carrying her.

Holding her in his arms, Richard looked to the six Mord-Sith. "Cassia, Vale, Berdine, Rikka, Nyda—I want you all to stay in the room with Kahlan and watch over her. Vika, I'll let you continue to have my back."

"Yes, Lord Rahl," they said as one.

"And I want you all in your red leather."

Their expressions grim, they all nodded.

"Let's go."

6

Once Richard had gently laid Kahlan in their bed, Shale pushed in beside him to sit on the edge of the bed to lay her hands on Kahlan's chest to continue the healing. Richard backed away, feeling useless when he thought he should be doing something. He'd healed Kahlan before when she had been seriously hurt. It didn't make any sense to him that he couldn't do it this time. Shale had saved Kahlan's life by making him go see if she was safe, so he trusted her. He didn't now want to start being suspicious of her.

He and Kahlan were so close that in the past that bond only helped make healing all that much more powerful and effective. It seemed to him that it should be the same now. He didn't know why Shale thought otherwise.

Berdine lit lamps around the room and then closed the heavy drapes. Rikka and Vale brought in more wood and fed some of it into the massive fireplace across the room to take the chill out of the air. Summer was giving way to autumn. Nyda brought sheets and blankets and laid them on a table nearby in case they should be needed. Cassia filled a basin on a white marble-top table with fresh water. All the Mord-Sith looked grim as they went about making sure everything they were able to do was tended to. Everyone wanted to help Kahlan, and he suspected they felt as useless as he did.

The knife wound in Kahlan's chest was closed. It had damaged her lung, but he had started healing it immediately when he first found her. At least he had managed to stop the bleeding right away. Even so, she had lost a lot of blood. Shale finished working on the knife wound and then used her gift to push in air to inflate the lung once more so Kahlan could breathe easier.

The claw marks down her arm were already closed with Shale's gift, but because they were so deep the sorceress said they would require more structural work. For now she had merely closed them and stopped the bleeding. It was obvious to Richard how methodical the sorceress was in

the way she went about her work. Those massive wounds would need the layers of muscles to be properly joined back together one at a time so that full function would be restored to Kahlan's arm. Shale had also pulled together the gaping flesh across her ribs and closed the wound.

Thankfully, Shale had put Kahlan into a deep sleep so that she wouldn't feel much of anything as the sorceress went about the work.

Richard now realized that peacetime had lowered his guard. For years he had been used to being continually on alert for any trouble. He had found peacetime a respite. Besides that, a single man had never been any danger to a Confessor of Kahlan's power before. The reality was that it all had caused him to let down his guard. Shale had been right. He was an idiot. He could not feel more foolish for having it pointed out to him by a stranger. Maybe it was her fresh perspective, but whatever the reason, Shale's alertness had saved Kahlan's life.

Even given all that, Shale was also a witch woman, and that concerned him. His familiar state of suspicion was back in full force. He and Kahlan had a long history of trouble caused by witch women.

"You can stay and watch if you like," Shale said to him as he stood beside the bed staring down at the only woman he had ever loved—the only woman he could ever love. "I don't mind at all, Lord Rahl, really, and I completely understand if that is your wish. You don't really know me, so I take no offense at any suspicion you might have." She almost seemed to be reading his mind. "She is in good hands. I swear. I will let no harm come to her." With a quick smile, she tipped her head at the Mord-Sith. "Neither will they."

She was gently reminding him that there was some kind of trouble that had attacked Kahlan and it was his job as Lord Rahl to get to the bottom of it, not stand around twiddling his thumbs, worried about Kahlan while he watched her work.

There were things that only the Lord Rahl could do, and he realized he should get to it before anything else happened.

Richard nodded. "I need to go question the other Estorians. I want to question Nolo, too, but I want Kahlan well and at my side when I do. She used her power on him. If it worked at all, he will answer no one's questions but hers."

Shale pushed up her sleeves before going back to work on Kahlan as Richard left to go looking for trouble.

7

At the outer gate to the narrow road that wound its way down around the plateau to the Azrith Plain, Vika was already waiting with two horses. He had absently expected it to be Cara. In the past, it would have always been Cara ready to accompany him. Seeing Vika jolted him out of his thought and worry about Kahlan.

Cara was gone. She had done as she had always sworn she would do. She had given her life to save his. A day didn't go by that he didn't miss her.

Now Vika had taken Cara's place, and with no less resolve. Still, Cara had been more than his protector and friend. He almost always knew what she had been about to say before she said it and what she was going to do before she did it. Kahlan and he had come to love her like family. She was family. Strange as it sometimes seemed, all the Mord-Sith were, even if some of them were still only coming to understand that.

“While you were taking the Mother Confessor to your room I took the liberty of telling the commander of the First File that you would want the other Estorians detained. I hope I wasn't being too presumptuous.”

She gestured with a tilt of her head toward the men of the First File already on horseback, waiting off to the side beside a towering outer wall of the palace.

Vika had done that entirely on her own initiative, without orders, something Mord-Sith had been trained not to do. He couldn't help smiling. That was what Cara would have done.

“Yes that was presumptuous, Vika. Well done. You go right on being presumptuous.”

As she swung her leg up over the saddle, he saw her smile to herself. It occurred to Richard that she was going to be just fine.

Once in the saddle, Richard rested his hands over the saddle's horn as he surveyed the sprawling tent city far below. Flags and colorful streamers

flew from many a tent. Smoke rose from cook fires. Horses, wagons, and carts moved slowly through the confined spaces crowded with people. It was a festive occasion. Richard had already begun to think of it as a threatening one. He was beginning to wonder if they should cancel the public audience and disband the tent city.

Above them the palace rose up, its towering heights resplendent in a single shaft of late-day sun just peeking through a rare break in the thick layers of clouds. He could see people strolling across bridges between towers or on ramparts or looking out from taller sections. Other people on balconies outside many of the rooms met for conversation while they marveled at the views.

While most of them had never thought it would come, it was peacetime. Everyone seemed relaxed. Everyone seemed in a good mood. Richard, too, had been relaxed. Too relaxed.

As the clouds rolled together, they closed the gap and blocked off the sun. The day grew somber. The threatening sky matched his mood. The bottoms of dark, turbulent clouds lowered, silently drifting by, just beginning to brush the higher parts of the palace.

In the distance, the Azrith Plain vanished in a gloomy haze. On the plain below the plateau, in the muted light, the temporary tent city took on a drab appearance. Somewhere down there were the rest of the Estorians.

With two fingers Richard lifted his sword a few inches in its gold and silver scabbard to make sure it was clear before squeezing his legs against the sides of his horse to start it ahead at an easy trot. The cavalry fell in behind him and Vika.

Richard felt as if peacetime had abruptly come to an end. He was back in a familiar, war-wizard state of mind. As they started out, the breeze lifted his gold cape, a part of a war wizard's outfit.

Along with the smell of approaching rain, the aromas of cooking reached all the way up to the top of the plateau. The smells made his stomach grumble. He realized he hadn't had a thing to eat all day.

The ride down the narrow road was the fastest way to get to the Azrith Plain. There were internal passageways through the interior of the massive plateau that could accommodate large forces of troops going down or coming back up, but they were not as fast as the road. As he and Vika

galloped along, with a small army behind them, he could see the bridge already being lowered. They didn't slow.

With a tip of his head, Richard acknowledged the men lined up to the side with fists to their hearts as he and Vika raced by. These men prevented any attack from below ever making it up the road. With the bridge up, there was no way to get up the plateau from the outside. On the inside, the great doors could be closed if necessary to prevent access to the palace from within.

The tent city spread out down on the plain was a congested place filled with the racket of all the people crowded close together. Most people wanted their tents offering services and items for sale to be as close as possible to the opening that went up the inside of the plateau to the palace above. Not everyone wanted to make the long climb up. Most of the assembled crowd simply wanted to be present for the occasion or else to sell things to people who had gathered.

Ill-planned passageways among the tents served as roads. They had started out in the beginning as wide thoroughfares, but then people took advantage of that open space to set up their own smaller tents and stands to have a better spot along the roads to hawk their wares, sell food, and provide every service from farriers to palm readers to men who pulled teeth. With everyone staking out prime territory, it had eventually narrowed the roads. With all the people on foot, on horses, in wagons, and pulling carts, what passageways there were became clogged. It slowed Richard and his party considerably, as they had to take time to carefully pick their way through.

When people saw that it was the Lord Rahl, yet more rushed to push in close, reaching out to touch him, or touch his horse. Cheers rang out, as if the dark day had dampened their spirits, but now such an unexpected sight had renewed their optimism. Men waved their hats, women waved scarves, people held children up to see.

Richard did his best to smile and wave acknowledgment of the greetings. The people were all there because they were happy to have a world at peace all thanks to Lord Rahl and wanted to show their appreciation. He didn't want to extinguish their good spirits. While these people were in a sudden, celebratory mood, Richard wasn't.

With a hand signal, he ordered the commander of the cavalry forward, and he asked to have the soldiers clear a path so they could make it through the growing throng of excited people before they were mobbed.

Some of the soldiers pushed off ahead, shouting warnings for people to move aside and make way, making it sound like it was for their own safety, and not merely an order for them to defer to an important man. That simple method worked better than harsh orders yelled at people, and didn't dampen their mood. It appeared that the commander had used some intelligent initiative of his own.

At intersections with side passageways, soldiers placed their horses to block off the roads to clear the way for Richard. As people moved back, it made progress considerably quicker. All eyes remained on Richard in his black and gold war-wizard outfit and gold cape flowing out behind, as well as the Mord-Sith in red leather. These people had obviously never expected the Lord Rahl himself to come down among them, down from the grand People's Palace to their grubby tent city. The presence of a Mord-Sith would add an air of danger to the story once these people eventually returned home.

On one hand it was heartwarming to be down in the tent city. These were the kind of simple people he had grown up with. On the other hand, someone from down here had threatened him and Kahlan, and then tried to kill her.

When they finally reached the tent with its sides rolled up to the roof, there was already a large force of men of the First File there. They surrounded the tent, all with pikes lowered, all pointing at the small group of people clustered in the center of the tent. It would have been impossible for any of them to leave without being skewered on at least half a dozen steel-tipped pikes.

Richard swung down from the saddle and handed the reins to a soldier. He glanced up to see a sky darker-looking than it had been only a little earlier when he had left the top of the plateau. It wouldn't be long before the rains came and turned the temporary dirt streets through the tent city into a muddy quagmire.

The men guarding the Estorians formed an intimidating wall of dark leather and chain mail behind the pikes. The soldiers made way when they

saw that it was the Lord Rahl and a Mord-Sith in red leather who needed to get through.

Although the people in white robes who were huddled together in the center of their tent didn't look like they were trembling in fear, they certainly didn't look at ease, either. He supposed that diplomats weren't used to dealing with direct threats of weapons pointed at them. Inside the broad tent, to the sides, were small tables and simple stools where they could discuss their services with potential customers. Quills and ink stood ready for signing agreements for their services. Everyone in the cluster of people wore white robes with varying amounts of silver embroidery; none of them were openly armed. A few women among them cowered in the center, surrounded by their men.

"What is it, Lord Rahl?" one of the men asked as he took a step away from his comrades. They all cast worried looks at the Mord-Sith in red leather. "Whatever the problem might be, it surely has to be a misunderstanding of some kind. There is no need for displays of weapons. We are all more than open to discussing the matter, whatever it is, and coming to a mutually agreeable resolution."

Richard's gaze swept over the group and then returned to settle on the man who had spoken.

"One of your group tried to murder the Mother Confessor," Richard said without preamble. "What would be your agreeable resolution to that?"

They all looked too shocked to answer or even profess their innocence. They certainly didn't look dangerous, but then again, neither had the pear-shaped Nolo.

"What can you tell me about a member of your group named Nolodondri?" Richard asked as he took an aggressive step closer, the palm of his left hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

They all took a step back as one. A wall of soldiers with leveled, steel-tipped pikes behind them just outside the open back of the tent left no real room for further retreat.

"Nolo? He is the consul general," the same man said. "Our leader."

"What is your name?"

The man swallowed. "Jason, Lord Rahl. I am an aide to the consul general."

"Why have you all come here, Jason?"

Jason gestured around at the small tables. “We only came to discuss our diplomatic services with interested parties. We are seeking work. As you can imagine, the end of wars that have raged throughout our lives has left us to look hard for people needing our services. Of course there is always need for diplomacy. This gathering seemed like a good opportunity to make ourselves better known in the empire at large.”

“Why did the consul general come up to the palace?”

Jason glanced up at the plateau. He looked a little confused. “Nolo went up to the palace?”

Richard nodded without saying anything. He had learned as the Seeker that his silence and direct glare often did more to prompt answers than anything else.

“He left early this morning,” Jason offered. “We didn’t know he was going up to the palace, I swear. We assumed he was merely going around visiting those gathered down here to ask them to stop by to speak with us about our very reasonably priced services.

“Our plan has always been to be down here, among the great gathering, so that we might make valuable contacts. There was no plan for any of us to go up to the palace itself. That would provide no benefit for us, as we know that the palace would hardly need our humble services. It would be those who deal with you and the D’Haran Empire who might want our help and guidance in diplomatic matters. That kind of person or representative of an outlying district would be down here, not up there.”

“Tell me about Nolo,” Richard said. “Has he said anything out of the ordinary? Has he acted out of the ordinary?”

The people behind Jason shared looks. “As a matter of fact,” Jason said, hesitantly, “he has been acting... a bit strange.”

“Define ‘strange,’” Richard said.

The man spread his hands as he tried to think of how to explain it. “Well, for one thing, the consul general has been going for walks. Mostly at night.”

Richard frowned at the man. “Why is that out of the ordinary? Lots of people go for walks.”

Jason suddenly blushed at having to explain it. “The consul general is a... well, a large man, I guess you could say. Because of his size he has bad knees. He has difficulty standing for any length of time, much less walking very far at all. But lately he has been going on walks—alone, by his choice,

without any of his top advisors.” Jason gestured to some of the men behind him in the more elaborately embroidered robes.

Richard’s gaze swept across the huddled group again, pausing to take in the higher-ranking advisors. “Do any of you know why he went for these walks, where he went, or if he met anyone while out on these nightly jaunts?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“And no one questioned him about his knees and how they fared on these walks?” Everyone shook their heads again. “What else has he been doing that is out of the ordinary? Perhaps he said something about the walks, where he went, or someone he might have spoken with?”

Once again, everyone shook their heads.

Richard took a step closer, Vika, his ever-present shadow, moving with him. “What else, Jason, has the consul general done that you thought was strange? No matter how small it may have seemed, I want you to tell me about it.”

Jason put a finger to his lower lip as he squinted in recollection. “Yes.” He took the finger away from his lip and shook it as he remembered. “He did say something odd this morning before he left.”

“Like what?”

“He said he had to go see the shiny man. But he didn’t say it to us, exactly. He mumbled it to himself.”

Richard frowned. “The shiny man. What does that mean, the shiny man?”

“I’m sorry, Lord Rahl, but I haven’t the slightest idea. It was early this morning. He simply said that he had to go see the shiny man. We saw him say this to himself, then he left without saying a word to any of us. We didn’t know what he meant and we certainly didn’t suspect that he was going up to the palace. We were all bewildered by his behavior. We haven’t seen him since.”

8

Richard, his arms folded over his chest, leaned his shoulders back against one of the small granite columns that stood on each side of the corridor as he brooded. That corridor was the only way into the entry area outside the master bedroom. The single broad corridor led out to a network of passageways. Soldiers were stationed back a ways in that corridor as well as in every branching hall. The large entry area outside the master bedroom was elaborately decorated with raised panels of book-matched crotch mahogany polished to a high luster. Detailed layers of crown molding finished off the look.

Richard's gaze was locked on the double doors on the opposite side of the entryway. They were carved with ornate designs that mimicked the spell-form the palace itself was laid out to. Kahlan was on the other side of those closed doors. He was beside himself with worry about what was going on and why it was taking so long. If he could, he would have willed the doors open.

As he agonized about Kahlan, he also thought about his meeting with the Estorians. He didn't trust anything they had told him, even if he had to admit that on the surface it had all seemed to ring true. But these were diplomats who were versed in making any argument sound reasonable. For all Richard knew, they could be lying through their teeth and they could have all been part of an elaborate plot to assassinate him and Kahlan. Richard was no longer taking anything for granted. His suspicious, questioning nature was on full alert.

For the time being, the Estorians weren't going anywhere. Their tent had been rolled up by the soldiers and put in storage. Meanwhile, Richard saw to it that they all were placed in "guest" rooms and asked not to leave until the situation could be straightened out.

To ensure they didn't decide to leave, they were being heavily guarded with instructions that they remain confined. Richard didn't want them wandering off in case more questions came up, or if anything they said turned out not to be true. He especially didn't want them wandering around loose in the palace if it turned out they were part of an assassination plot.

Richard shifted his weight to his other leg as he waited. The soldiers stationed in the corridors had told him that Shale hadn't come out yet. Neither had any of the Mord-Sith in there watching over Kahlan.

Since it was deep in the middle of the night, Richard had sent Vika off, against her objections, to get some sleep. She complied, but grumbled as she stormed off like a pouty child sent to bed early.

The constant worry was wearing on him. He considered going in to see what was happening and why it was taking so long, but he didn't want to interrupt the sorceress if the healing was at a critical juncture. He knew from experience that in the very intense process of healing a seriously injured person, he wouldn't want someone coming up to tap him on the shoulder and ask how it was going.

Just then the door opened. It was Shale coming out.

Richard rushed across the elaborate, deep-blue-and-orange-carpeted entryway to meet her. She was once again in the black outfit she had been wearing when he had first seen her.

He knew that, with a witch woman, there was no telling what their clothing really looked like or for that matter what they even really looked like. They somehow had the ability to bend things into an illusion, or perhaps it was an ability to alter a viewer's vision to what they expected to see. Shota had been able to change her appearance at will. From his experience, a witch woman showed you only what she wanted you to see, or what you expected to see, not what was really there to see. Shale obviously had at least some of that same ability. He wondered how much she wanted him to see of her true self.

As she approached, before he could even ask, Shale lifted a hand. "Your wife is going to be fine, Lord Rahl. I am relieved to report that she is past the biggest danger. There is more I will need to do, but for now I want to let her get some sleep. For the rest of the healing she first needs a good night's sleep."

Richard craned sideways to look into the room before Berdine closed the double doors. She flashed him a smile that looked more brave than happy. He was able to look past her to see Kahlan lying in the bed, her hands folded over her stomach, her eyes closed. She looked to be resting peacefully. He was also relieved to see that she was in a clean nightdress, rather than her bloody, white Confessor dress.

“What do you mean?” Richard asked, looking back at Shale. “What more do you need to do?”

The sorceress let out a weary sigh. “There was another puncture wound in her right side that we didn’t see before because of all the blood. It was another wound from a claw—like the one that tore up her left arm. I think that whatever attacked her must have impaled her with a claw into her side to incapacitate her while it tore her arm apart with its other claw. It caused a kind of wasting damage to some internal organs.”

Richard’s alarm rose to a new level. “Wasting damage—you mean like from snake venom?”

“Something like that. Fortunately it moves through the victim more like molasses than venom so it’s not as aggressive as a viper’s poison would be. It’s as lethal, just not as fast. I found that it had caused similar tissue damage in her arm.”

“So then she’s been poisoned?”

“Yes... but not exactly.” Shale made a face, trying to think of how to explain it. She looked up when it came to her. “You know how when a cat claws you it may not look very bad, but then in a day or two your whole arm is red and swollen to twice its size?”

“I suppose so.”

“It’s something like that. More than an infection and less than poison. I’m able to heal it, but it’s more complicated than simply healing an ordinary wound.”

“But she is well, now?”

“She’s resting comfortably for now. She still has damage and I will need to finish the healing. What is to come is a painful process of tearing apart tissues that have attached improperly after the attack and then setting them right. I healed those things that were urgent and I put her into a deep sleep so that she could rest more easily.

“Rest will help stabilize her so that her body can heal some of the other things on her own. Rest is a great medicine. Tomorrow, or maybe the next day, when she has a good dose of that medicine and is strong enough to handle it, I will be able to finish.”

“But in the meantime, aren’t those things not yet healed, or attached improperly, a danger to her?”

Shale smiled in a way that said she found his worry endearing but overwrought.

“Lord Rahl, trust me. I know what I’m doing. Everything is under control and proceeding as it needs to.”

When he didn’t seem all that relieved, Shale pressed the flat of her hand to his chest. He felt the warmth of magic meant to reassure him radiating from that hand through his body. While it was a nice gesture, he didn’t appreciate it.

“I swear to you,” Shale said, taking her hand back, “she is past the danger that threatened her life. When she has rested and regained enough strength I will finish it and you will have your beautiful lady back, good as before. All right?”

Richard nodded as he walked off a few paces, letting his fingertips drag over the smooth surface of the eight-sided marble tabletop sitting in the middle of the entryway. The colorful flowers in the three vases in the center lent a calming aroma to the entire room. It reminded him of the outdoors where he had grown up. He took a deep breath of that fragrance and let it out slowly, relieved to have his agony of worry eased somewhat.

“Thank you, Shale. You’ve saved her twice. First, when you alerted me to how careless I was being, and then with the healing.”

As his grandfather had often warned him, peacetime was sometimes more dangerous than war. He had let his guard down. He could just imagine Zedd’s scowl at him being so careless. He vowed not to let it happen again.

“I’m glad I was here to help,” Shale said from behind him.

He looked back over his shoulder, giving her a more critical look. “Your clothes are black, again.”

She knitted her fingers together in front of her as she twisted her mouth, looking up as she thought how to answer what was obviously a question.

“You don’t know much about women’s dress, do you?”

Richard shrugged at the strange question. “I know what I like looking at. But I have a feeling you mean something else.”

She smiled. “Women don’t like wearing the same dress as another woman to an important gathering—or any gathering, for that matter. It is well known that the Mother Confessor wears a white dress. While not the same dress, I still did not want to come before you both in the great hall appearing to disrespect her by also wearing her traditional white.”

Richard was a bit surprised. “I guess you put more thought into it than I would have.”

“That’s because you’re a man.”

“And why did you come here in the first place?”

She was momentarily caught off guard. “You ask strange questions out of the blue, Lord Rahl.”

“I am the Seeker.” He tapped the hilt of his sword. “I carry the Sword of Truth. I ask those things which need asking. So why did you really come here?”

“I told you, I came to offer the loyalty of the Northern Waste to the D’Haran Empire.”

“I’m not in a very good mood, Shale. That’s an excuse. Tell me the real reason you’re here.”

9

Shale sagged a little as she wiped a weary hand back across her face. “I’d prefer not to have to get into it just now, not after what’s happened today, and not after I spent so much time and energy in a difficult healing, but I can see that you aren’t going to be satisfied until you know the truth. I will give you the gist of it, but ask that we discuss it in detail later, after I have had some rest.”

Richard shrugged. “Fair enough.”

“I admit there is more to why I’m here. You say you ask those things which need to be asked. There are things which I need to ask as well. I came for answers to those things.”

“Such as?”

Her bewitching eyes looked up at him from under her brow. “Such as why are the stars not where they belong in the sky? Why are the stars all jumbled up so that I no longer recognize them?”

Richard let out a long sigh. “Oh, that.”

Her look darkened. “Yes, that. I have a feeling that only you could be responsible.”

Richard lifted a hand in a gesture reflecting his discomfort about the subject. “I had to initiate a star shift. It was an act of desperation.”

“I see that you are going to make me chase you round and round and then strangle you until you answer.” She gave him the kind of dangerously sober look that seemed unique to witch women. “What is a star shift, Lord Rahl,” she said slowly and carefully, “and what was the desperation?”

“It had to do with an evil that had festered for thousands of years, and a war that had never really ended. An emperor from that time rose up from the grave, tearing the veil between life and death in the process. He intended to join the underworld and the world of life, foolishly believing he could rule over it all.”

Her mouth opened in surprise. “Combining them would have only destroyed both!”

Richard’s brow lifted. “Glad you grasp the problem. To stop him from finishing what he had already begun to do, I had to use the boxes of Orden for their true purpose—initiating a star shift.”

“Boxes of Orden?”

“Ancient magic, constructed spell and all that,” he said with a dismissive gesture that said that wasn’t the important point.

“And that put this evil spirit back in his grave where he belonged?”

“It did,” Richard said. “It healed the veil and ended the ancient war that had smoldered all that time only to finally reignite. I can’t begin to know how many people died because of that evil man. People we all know and loved died. Too many good souls never had a chance to live their lives because of him. Many more would have died if I hadn’t done something. Everyone would have died. I had to put a stop to it.

“I did it in the only way that could work. It changed our world, I admit that. But I don’t regret what I did. It saved life itself.”

“But how is it possible for the stars to be different?”

“The ancient magic I used was the only thing that had the power to close the breach and stop the worlds of life and death from imploding. It’s a bit like a constructed spell. Once initiated, it runs routines according to its internal protocol. That power, once ignited, ultimately shifted the stars.”

She looked even more upset. “But how could you have unleashed such a —”

“Had I not done as I did we would all be dead right now. Do you understand? Dead. Worse than that, the worlds of life and death would have come together and both would have ceased to exist. Everyone forever would have ceased to exist. We were all out of time. It was either the star shift or no world of life, simple as that. I chose life.

“Some of the changes caused by the star shift are known—such as the stars suddenly being unfamiliar to us. But it altered other things as well. We don’t yet know the extent of the changes.”

She peered up at him in dismay. “Are you sure? There was no other way?”

“None,” he said with finality. “It wasn’t a situation of my choosing. Like I say, it was an act of desperation.”

Shale fell quiet for a time as she looked off, trying to comprehend such a monumental event.

“Besides being a sorceress,” she finally said, her voice weaker, “I am also a witch woman. Some of my ability as a sorceress, such as healing, still works as always.” She looked up expectantly at him. “But other things, such as my ability to see into the flow of time, seem to be lost to me. That ability is part of who I am, what I am, and now I can’t call it forth.

“This is in part the reason I came to see you—to ask how soon can I expect my ability to see into the flow of time to be restored to normal?”

Richard let out a sigh as he considered how to tell her. “Part of the key to saving the world of life was that it was necessary to end prophecy. The star shift was a way to do that. I’m afraid that a witch woman’s ability to see into the flow of time is a form of prophecy. I had to end all forms of prophecy.”

“End prophecy?” She looked both dumbfounded and horrified. “How could you do such a thing? How could you possibly take it upon yourself to destroy such a fundamental part of the lives of so many people?”

“That’s where you are wrong,” he said, leaning closer, “and that was the key to our survival. Prophecy is alien to the world of life. It was long ago sent here from the timeless world of the dead. Having that corrosive force here in this world was part of how that ancient, dead emperor was destroying the veil separating life and death. I had to end prophecy by sending it back to the world of the dead where it belongs. The star shift was the only way of doing it. I’m afraid that your ability to see into the flow of time will never return.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. “But that’s who I am. It’s part of me.”

“An alien part,” he said. “Would you keep an arm eaten away by gangrene because that dying arm was ‘a part of you’? No. To preserve life you would cut it off before it could kill you. That’s what I did. Cutting off that arm would certainly hurt, but it would also keep you alive.

“Prophecy was never meant to be part of who witch women really are. It was a crutch that in part gave witch women such a fearsome reputation. Believe me, witch women can be plenty fearsome without needing to see into the flow of time. That alien ability was also sometimes the cause of great harm.

“In the past, the false prophecies of a witch woman nearly killed me, nearly killed Kahlan. Witch women have had otherworldly power for so long they came to believe it was part of them, but it’s not. It was in reality death lurking within you. I’ve ended it.”

He knew by her expression that he had not heard the last of it, so he thought he needed to end the argument before it could fester in her.

“It’s done, Shale. There is no putting it back to the way it was, any more than it is possible for me to put the stars back where they were. The spell has run its course. It is over and done.

“Our lives have all changed—mine included. Life is about change. Change has both good and bad elements to it. You can either deal with the way things have changed and move forward, or you can let bitterness about what’s lost in the past rob you of your future.

“I’m afraid that what happened here today with this business about a goddess is one of those bad changes brought about by the star shift. I don’t like it and I don’t yet know what it means, but we have to figure it out and deal with it.”

She nodded distantly. “I guess so.”

“When I was starting to heal Kahlan,” Richard said, changing the subject to get her mind off it, “you told me that there was something else going on, and that if I kept going I would kill her. What was it you felt?”

“It was that poison I told you about. Those claws planted the infection or poison in her during the attack. One of my healing talents—I’m not sure I can adequately explain it—is that I can, in a way, see what is happening inside the person I’m healing. I could tell that your gift had a dangerous effect on that poison. I don’t know if it was an intended effect or simply that the two could not coexist. They were oil and water, you might say. Had I not stopped you, the Mother Confessor would have gone on to suffer a lingering death, but only after it had killed you first.”

Richard was taken aback. “Do you think it was deliberate? That it was meant for me?”

“When I first probed for her injuries, I could feel your gift seeping into her. I could also feel that malevolence being drawn to your gift. Your gift attracted it. Had you kept the contact with her, it would have used that link to seep into you and kill you as surely as a bite from a viper.”

“Why didn’t it react to your gift the same way?”

She shook her head. “I’m not entirely sure of the reason, but I could see that it was drawn to your gift. I was able to get around it, allowing me to come in behind it and choke it off. Our gift is different. You are a war wizard, I am, among other things, a healer. Maybe your aggressive ability with your gift drew it.”

Richard paced off a short distance. “I guess I owe you a debt of gratitude. Not only have you saved Kahlan’s life, it seems you may have saved mine as well.”

“True enough. I guess it’s fortunate I showed up when I did.”

10

Richard looked back over his shoulder at her. “What’s the rest of the reason for you making such a long journey? I suspect there is more to it.”

Shale confirmed that with a troubled sigh. “Some of my people have been killed in a very strange fashion.”

“Killed by who?”

“Not who, what. We find remains—larger bones and the dirty end of a gut pile—much like a mountain lion might leave from a calf or lamb kill. And the head. It always leaves the head. We don’t know what is doing the killing, but no horses or farm animals have been killed in this same manner. This is something that hunts people exclusively.”

“Is the Northern Waste covered with snow yet?”

“It’s early in the season, but the snows have already come to large parts of it. It has snowed in some of the places where victims were found.”

“Snow would make for clear tracks. What do the tracks look like?”

“There were markings in the snow,” she said, looking somewhat at a loss. “Markings, of a sort, I guess you could say, but not exactly tracks. The snow was disturbed by networks of conflicting lines. There were no tracks as such, no indication of what sort of beast it might be, just a crisscrossed matrix of lines.”

“I presume you followed them?”

“They were only in the immediate vicinity of the kill. They came from nowhere and led nowhere. There are no footprints, no claw prints, no wing impressions of something landing. Just those slashes and streaks in the snow, and then, of course, blood and the bones that were stripped of flesh and left. Sometimes some of the clothes were left as well, but not always. We find the flesh stripped from the skull and the eyes sucked out, making it difficult to identify the victim. There simply were no tracks to follow and

even these strange slashes never went very far. It's as if it simply appeared out of nowhere and then after the kill vanished into thin air."

Richard looked off, thinking out loud. "Right off the top of my head that doesn't make any sense. A gar could drop in on prey but they would have left plenty of distinctive prints. Same with a dragon. Anything I know of that's large enough to snatch up a person and spit out the bones would have had to have left tracks. Of course, I'm not familiar with all the beasts in D'Hara, and I know virtually nothing of the Northern Waste."

"Well, I can tell you that there has never been any beast in the Waste I know of that would leave these kinds of marks in the snow. There are things like wolves and such that will take a person, but this is very different."

"Any other strange things going on that might help give us the bigger picture?"

"There is something else that I'm pretty sure is related." Shale clasped her hands as she looked away for a moment. "Do you remember that gravedigger up in the great hall, earlier today?" she asked.

"The one who said they had found dead animals on graves?"

She nodded. "We have been finding dead animals on graves, just as he described."

Richard stared in shock. "You've got to be kidding."

"No. Not only that, but on a few of the graves we have also found people. Freshly killed people."

Richard stared at her. "Killed how?"

Shale looked up at him with a grim expression. "They were mauled just like your wife—clawed to death, eviscerated—only the thing that attacked them had time enough to finish the job. The difference is they weren't eaten like the other victims. Their remains were simply dropped on graves."

"I recognized the Mother Confessor's wounds immediately when I saw them. The dead people on the graves were infected with something that wasted away at the flesh and organs even after they were dead. That was why I knew to look for it in her. I felt sure she would be infected the same as the victims found on graves and I was right."

"Are you sure they were killed by the same kind of creature that eats their kill? What about tracks?"

Shale clasped her hands in front of her as she stared off in thought for a moment.

“There were those same odd tracks. It was the same kind of creature that killed them. I’m sure of it.”

“Can you describe the tracks better? What did they look like?”

“Well...” Shale squinted as she tried to think how to be more specific. “Imagine if you took a very thin willow switch and smacked it against the ground over and over from every direction all around, hundreds of times—maybe thousands of times—as you moved along, always changing the direction of the strikes. We followed these strange marks, and over a short distance they gradually became less and less until there were no more, leaving only virgin snow.”

Richard, his left palm resting on the sword, tapped a finger against the raised gold wire spelling out the word “TRUTH” on the hilt. “I can’t even imagine what could have left marks like that in the snow. Except maybe someone with a thin willow branch hitting the ground over and over from every direction, trying to deceive you?”

She looked over out of the corner of her eye. “Then there would have been footprints all around as they whipped the switch against the ground. There were no footprints of any kind—none—just all those strange marks.”

Richard was at a loss and could only shake his head.

“There’s something else,” she said in a troubled voice. “I have had murky visions of some kind of being. I’m sure it was the goddess spoken of by that man, Nolo. Shadows of her have visited me unbidden while I have been in meditation. That was another reason why, earlier today, I came forward when I did. I felt sure that the same visions I’ve had are the goddess he spoke of.”

Richard found this to be disturbing news. “Were you able to learn anything of her in these visions?”

Shale opened her hands in a helpless gesture. “Nothing, I’m afraid. I only had this vague, shadowy image. It did not speak. I had no idea what it could mean until I heard Nolo speaking, and then I knew there had to be a connection, much like I knew when I heard the gravedigger talking about dead animals left on graves that the same thing was happening to us.”

Richard’s first thought was to wonder if the goddess was trying to control Shale the same way she was possibly controlling Nolo. That thought alarmed him.

“There’s nothing you can describe from this impression? Nothing at all? Even the smallest thing might be helpful.”

Shale shook her head. “Sorry, Lord Rahl. I’m afraid not. Except that it felt like perhaps she was probing. I might try meditating again and see if I can learn more.”

“I’m not sure that would be such a good idea. That may have been what Nolo thought, too. I never really thought that anything good came from meditation. I suggest you not invite trouble into your head.”

“You may be right. We can discuss it later. Right now I’m exhausted.”

“Of course,” Richard said. “You need to get some rest. It’s going to be morning soon. There are rooms nearby. I’ll take you to one. You can use it as long as you wish to stay.”

“You need to get some rest as well, and I think it would be best if you take one of those rooms for yourself and sleep somewhere other than with your wife. Just for tonight. It would be best if she not be disturbed.”

Richard didn’t like the idea, but their bedroom was inaccessible except through the entryway he was in. Between the Mord-Sith in the room and the men of the First File all throughout the halls, nothing was going to get near Kahlan.

He let out a deep breath, resigned to sleeping alone. “At least she is going to be all right. That’s what matters.”

11

In the morning, not wanting to wake Kahlan if she was still asleep, Richard cautiously opened the bedroom door just enough to peek in. Vika, just behind him, leaned in over his right shoulder to have a look for herself. Cassia, just inside the double doors to one side, and Rikka, to the other, both turned to glare out at the intruder. When they saw it was him, their scowls relaxed.

Instead of seeing Kahlan asleep, Richard was surprised to see her just finishing getting dressed in a fresh new Confessor dress. The satiny smooth material, the square neck, and the way it hugged her shape were just as stunning as the first time he had seen her in the same kind of dress. He didn't think that there had ever been a better example of femininity and authority combined into one dress. He marveled at her every time he saw her in it. And more so when she was out of it.

Since she was awake and up, Richard opened the doors and strode into the room, happy to see her looking alert and well, but not at all pleased that she was getting dressed rather than resting.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

She cast a brief glance his way. “Getting ready for the petitioners in the great hall.”

Richard did his best to contain himself. “You aren’t finished being healed yet. Shale says you need to rest so that she can finish what she needs to do. You can’t go to the great hall.”

She gave him a cold look. “I certainly can, and I am going to. You are going as well.”

“Kahlan, finishing your healing is more important.”

“That can wait. This is more important.”

Richard was baffled. “What are you talking about? There is nothing more important than finishing the healing.”

She took a long, aggressive stride toward him. “Everyone saw a lot of strange and frightening things yesterday. They don’t know what any of it is about. Rumors will no doubt have already spread like wildfire. Those rumors and suspicions will undermine your rule and degrade our authority.

“Overnight stories—embellished stories—will have spread throughout the camp down below. People will be worried and anxious and already believe that we are in great trouble.

“We need everyone to come back this morning and see that there was nothing to their fears and that it was only a minor interruption that we took care of. We must show everyone that the rumors are wrong and we have everything under control.”

“Kahlan, I understand all that, I really do, but that’s secondary. You can’t —”

“The subject is not open to debate,” she snapped as she turned to the tall mirror. She picked up a hairbrush from the dressing table.

For some reason, she looked to be in a bad mood and her displeasure seemed directed at him. He got the uneasy feeling that he was in trouble. He supposed she had every right to be angry that he had let her go alone to question Nolo without even suggesting that he go with her. They could have done it later, together. Richard should have been there close by. That was a mistake, and it was his mistake. It had nearly gotten her killed.

Kahlan abruptly turned back to him from the mirror where she was fussing one-handed with her hair. Her left arm hung mostly limp at her side. She shook the brush at him.

“After we have the audience with petitioners in the great hall and reassure everyone, we are going to go question Nolo. I trust that you have him locked up?”

“I do, but first Shale needs—”

“I don’t recall offering you alternatives,” she said in an icy tone.

This was not Kahlan. This was the Mother Confessor, who was not at all happy. Worse, it was all too clear that he was the center of her ire.

“Kahlan,” he said softly as he slipped an arm around her waist, “I’m sorry I let you go alone with Nolo. It’s my fault. I should have been a lot more cautious. I should have been there with you.”

That seemed to only set her off. She pulled away from him and glanced around at the six Mord-Sith in the room.

“Please leave us.” She gestured with the brush, shooing them all out.
“Wait for us outside. We will be out shortly.”

The six Mord-Sith shared looks and started filing out.

Berdine leaned close on her way by. “I think you are in trouble, Lord Rahl. She’s been calling you ‘my husband’ ever since she woke up.”

“Great,” he muttered. “Get Shale and tell her Kahlan is up, then wait outside for us. Tell her to hurry.”

Richard closed the doors behind them, trying to think of a way to talk Kahlan out of putting her well-being last. When he turned back to the room, Kahlan was brushing her hair with her one good hand as if she wanted to rip it out by the roots. She was now angry at her hair for not bending to her will.

Richard crossed their grand bedroom to be closer to her. “Kahlan, what’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong?” She turned to him in a fury. “What’s wrong!”

“Tell me. Please? What is it?”

She tossed the brush on the dressing stand and rapidly closed the distance to him to start jabbing her finger against the center of his chest. “What’s wrong is your promise, that’s what’s wrong!”

“Promise?” Richard was mystified. “What promise?”

She exploded. “What promise? What promise!” She jabbed her finger hard against his chest. “Your promise as a wizard!”

Richard was truly confused. He grabbed her wrist to stop her jabbing.

“Kahlan, I don’t know what promise you’re talking about.”

“It obviously meant so little that you don’t even remember!”

Richard heaved a sigh in frustration, trying to hold his own anger in check. “I guess not, so why don’t you tell me.”

She tried to jab a finger at him with her left hand, since he was holding her right wrist, but she couldn’t hold the arm up on its own long enough. It fell limp to her side.

“You promised me a new golden age.” Her beautiful green eyes welled up with tears. “That was what you said.”

Before he could reply, she pointed toward the balcony beyond the heavy drapes. “You promised me that night, out there. You said that with the star shift everything had changed and that this is the beginning of a new golden age. I asked you if you were sure. You said that it was a promise that you

were giving me as the First Wizard, and that wizards always keep their promises!"

"I remember," he said with an earnest nod.

"Do you, Richard? Do you even know what you were promising? I think you did. I think you were just saying something that sounded nice to make me feel good right then, when all along you knew the truth. The truth was something very different. You of all people are supposed to always be dead honest with me, but you were deceiving me. That's as good as a lie."

Richard frowned down at her. "I remember the promise of a new golden age, and I meant it. I don't know why you think I was deceiving you."

She gritted her teeth and then leaned in. "Nolo told me the name of the goddess that promises to take our world and slaughter us all. Do you know what she is called?"

"No."

"The Golden Goddess."

He was speechless at the news.

She started jabbing his chest with a finger again. "The Golden Goddess! You promised terror and death in a new age for our world under the Golden Goddess, that's what you were promising me!"

Richard snatched her wrist again. "She's called the Golden Goddess? Kahlan, I didn't know that. I swear, that's not what I meant."

"Wizards always keep their promises, often in the same way that a witch woman's prediction always turns out to be true... just not in the way you expected when you heard it, but true nonetheless. We are entering a new age of terror under the Golden Goddess. That's the golden age you promised me!"

Before Richard could answer, the doors burst open. It was an angry Shale. Her aura crackled with flickering flashes of fury as she marched across the room.

"What are you doing up! You need to be in bed and I—"

"We are going to the great hall to show our people that everything is stable and all is well," Kahlan said, cutting her off. "If my husband and I are not there it would only add fuel to rumors and create the impression that the Lord Rahl and the Mother Confessor couldn't handle things and we are being overwhelmed by trouble, which would mean they have no chance against such trouble. The rumors could get out of control and start a panic."

“We can’t afford to leave people with the impression that things are out of control. I won’t allow it. We will grant audiences to petitioners, as promised, in order to reassure people.”

“Perhaps for a brief appearance,” Shale offered as a compromise, “and then we come right back here to continue what I need to do to finish healing you.”

Kahlan fixed the woman in a hot glare. “We will spend the day seeing petitioners. A full day, just as people expect. After that, I am going down to question Nolo. You may come if you wish.”

Shale, looking concerned, reached out in an attempt to calm Kahlan down. “Mother Confessor, you need—”

“What I need is for all of you to stop arguing with me!” She started for the door. “If you want to come with me, then keep out of my way. Otherwise, stay here.”

Richard shared a troubled look with Shale.

“This is not wise,” the sorceress whispered to him.

“Neither is crossing the Mother Confessor,” Richard told her.

With a grimace, Shale nodded. “We had better do as she wants and go with her. Whether she realizes it or not, she is going to need help. We need to be close by.”

12

Throughout the day as they sat at the head of the great hall, beneath the massive medallion showing the lineage of the House of Rahl, Richard would occasionally lean close and whisper a suggestion that they call an end to the audience. Whenever he did, Kahlan would shoot him a cold look. She was determined to stay the entire day and show strength to not only the people gathered to speak with them and those who had come to observe, but also to the many palace officials. Those officials were important in conveying the proper mood to those they interacted with. To do that, they needed to be buoyed by what they saw.

It was not the first time Richard had seen Kahlan exhibit such determination to show strength to her people. She believed that showing leadership meant she had to rise above any personal pain.

In a way he was proud of her, and at the same time he was exasperated by her stubbornness.

After a long day in the great hall in which they answered one trivial concern after another, listened to the platitudes of kings and queens and heads of city-states, and accepted tokens of appreciation from the people of various parts of the D'Haran Empire, and after the boring normality of it all gradually doused the rumors that had flared up overnight, Kahlan finally stood.

In her confident, silky voice, she thanked everyone for coming. She told them what a great honor it had been for Lord Rahl and herself to host them at the People's Palace. She promised that they would try to make it to as many of the planned banquets as possible. She wished them a pleasant stay at the palace and a safe journey home when it came time for them to leave. She said that they would always be welcomed back to the people's house, the People's Palace.

As the applause, cheers, and clamor of conversation died out and people began to leave, Kahlan turned to Richard. She looked no happier than she had that morning.

“I need to question Nolo. Take me to where he is being held.”

“How about you let Shale finish helping you first.”

Kahlan turned to the captain of the guard. “Take me to where the prisoner is being held.”

Clapping a fist to his heart, he bowed his head. “This way, Mother Confessor.”

As the captain started out, Kahlan marched off right behind him, seemingly not caring if the rest of them came along or not. Richard and Shale had to hurry to catch up to her. The gaggle of Mord-Sith were right on their heels.

It was clear to Richard by the way she moved that Kahlan was in pain. Throughout the day she had used the arm that had been mauled less and less, and now it didn’t look like she was able to lift it for more than brief moments. Occasionally she had pressed her right hand over her side. Despite that pain, she showed no sign that she might be reasonable and allow Shale to finish the healing.

It was obvious to Richard that there was something bigger driving her.

As they left the upper broad corridors of the palace proper, the passageways became more utilitarian, the stairways less grand. By the time they reached the lower portion of the palace, the narrow, low, simple stone passageways were dark and dank. It was quite the juxtaposition to the beauty and grandeur of the great hall where they had seen the petitioners earlier.

Down in the lower passageways, one did one’s best not to touch the often dirty or slimy walls. As grim as the lower passageways were, Richard was thankful to be down there because that meant they were just that much closer to completing Kahlan’s wishes so that Shale could finish healing her.

Torches carried by soldiers both leading the way and following behind lit the forbidding passageways with flickering light that made their faces seem to float along in the darkness. As they hurried down the long halls, the flames flapped and hissed. Besides the light, those torches filled the air with the sharp smell of pitch. At least that smell was better than the all too frequent stench of the dead rats.

Water seeping down through the stone ceiling left slippery, wet, green mold in places. The oozing water had over ages created yellowish growths down the walls in areas that almost looked like the type of formations that he'd seen growing in caves.

Unlike the rest of them, Kahlan didn't look at anything in the cavelike passageways. She kept her eyes ahead, her expression grim and determined as she marched along on her way to see the man who had promised to take her world into a new age of a golden goddess.

An age she believed Richard had promised her.

Richard didn't quite know what to make of that, but he was confident that when he'd promised her a new age, he hadn't meant it would be under the tyranny of some mysterious golden goddess. He was hoping that Nolo could provide answers and from those they could find a solution.

They all came to a stop at a solid iron door completely blocking off the dark corridor. The soldiers on station there were already working several keys in multiple locks in order to get it open for them. Unlike the soldiers from up top in the palace, these men stationed down below were grimy and dirty. Their faces were blackened with soot from torches.

Once the heavy door had been pulled back on squealing hinges, they saw that there were more armed soldiers on the other side. Those soldiers all stood with their backs against the walls to let the visitors pass. After stepping through the low doorway, they soon came to long runs of iron stairs that led down into a large chamber. Their footsteps and the clanking of weapons echoed all the way down the stairs.

The chamber at the bottom, constructed of granite blocks, was damp and had an off-putting smell. It was clear that things had died down here. Most likely, people. It tainted the place with the enduring stench of death.

A series of rust-stained iron doors with small viewing slits lined each side of the rectangular room. Fingers gripped a few of those slots from the other side. The captain of the guard shepherded the group to the lone door at the far end.

"We put him in here, Lord Rahl," the captain said.

Richard nodded. "Don't bring him out. We will go in to see him."

The captain gave a nod to the men guarding the cell. After a soldier unlocked the door, two others pulled it open and went inside to unlock a second door. Once that was open, they took in half a dozen torches each and

placed them in iron brackets so the visitors would be able to see well enough.

As the soldiers placed the torches, Richard stepped in front of Kahlan to prevent her from going in first, as she had clearly intended.

Unlike the rest of the cells, this one was a relatively large room. By the row of manacles and chains pinned into the stone at regular intervals, the room was meant to hold a number of prisoners along the length of the wall, but now it held only one.

Nolo, heavily secured against the wall, was naked except for underpants stained with dried blood. Without his formal robes, all his body hair made him resemble a bear. That hair was also matted with dried blood.

Because they didn't want him crashing into walls and trying to kill himself, he had been tightly chained against the wall to prevent any further such attempts. An iron collar pinned in the granite allowed his head only inches of movement. A post held the collar away from the wall enough to prevent him from banging his head back against the stone. His arms were spread wide, iron bands pinning them against the wall at his shoulders and wrists in a way that prevented him from trying to hang himself to death in the collar. His legs and feet were secured with shackles and heavy chains. The smell of dried blood along with the sweaty man stunk up the room.

Nolo did not look at all well. His head hung as much as the tall metal collar would allow. His droopy, bloodshot eyes were open but stared unblinking down at the foot of the opposite wall, as if he were in a stupor. He showed no sign that he even knew that people had entered his cell.

“I want everyone out,” Kahlan said as she stared at the man immobilized against the wall.

“Well, that's not happening,” Richard said. “No way am I leaving.”

“Me neither,” Shale said. “I can clearly see that your injuries are causing you pain. I need to be close by, just in case you require help.”

“I'm not leaving Lord Rahl in here without me,” Vika said, defiantly.

The rest of the Mord-Sith chimed in that they weren't about to leave either of their charges alone and unprotected.

The muscles in Kahlan's jaw flexed as she clenched her teeth. She pointed at the door. “I would like the rest of you men to wait outside, please. Close the door. Kill anything that comes out that isn't us.”

The captain's steely gaze shifted among those gathered. "Lord Rahl has his sword, these Mord-Sith their Agiel, and this sorceress her powers. What is it that you think could make it out that would still need killing?"

"Just wait outside, please," Kahlan huffed.

When the captain looked at him out of the corner of an eye, Richard gave him a nod to do as she asked. The soldiers clapped fists to hearts, if less than enthusiastically, and left them with the heavyset, nearly naked, hairy-chested man chained to the wall.

13

Richard moved in close to Kahlan as she stared at Nolo. He didn't know what was behind it, but he was done with her fit of temper and by his tone made it clear he wasn't going to put up with it down here with a man who had already proven to be dangerous. He gripped her upper arm as he leaned in close.

"You have a job to do—a job you were born to do. You can yell at me all you want later, but right now you need to do your job. Our people are depending on us."

Her heated expression relented a little. She seemed to get a grip on her emotions as she nodded.

"Tell me what happened," he said to her as he pulled her back away from Nolo toward the sorceress. "You still haven't told me what happened when you used your power on him."

She looked up into the resolve in his eyes, then glanced at Shale. Her expression finally softened, returning to the Kahlan he knew.

"When I begin to release my power, it's as if time stops. In that otherworldly moment everyone else seems to me like nothing more than a stone statue. There is nothing they can do to stop me, least of all the one I have unleashed my power on. Right then as that connection is made, I guess the easiest way to explain it is that it's like a discharge of lightning. Pure power. Pure, heady power. The release of it is ecstasy."

"Right then, in that singular instant as the power has been released from deep inside me, the person is already beyond redemption, their mind is already gone, but that is also when I am at my weakest. I had been furious at the trouble Nolo was bringing us after the terrible war had finally ended. That anger added strength to the power I released. It sent the tables and chairs crashing against the walls. I heard the stone of the walls crack as the discharge of power buckled them. The lights were blown out."

Her brow bunched together as she was remembering it. “But right then, in that frozen blink of time as the power was still exploding from me, as the flames in the lamps were still floating above the wicks, those flames were stopped dead in midair like everything else for that instant before they were about to be blown out. In an infinitesimal speck of time, all that would soon change and it would be pitch black. But right then there was still light.

“That’s when it happened.”

Goose bumps tingled on Richard’s arms. “When what happened?”

She looked up into his eyes, haunted by what she had seen.

“That was when I saw the scribby man.”

The sorceress stepped closer and leaned in. “The what?”

“The scribby man,” Kahlan said. She put the fingers of her good hand to her forehead, obviously in distress at the memory. “That’s the only way I can think to explain it.”

“I don’t understand,” Richard said. “What do you mean by a ‘scribby’ man?”

Kahlan heaved a sigh of frustration, letting the arm flop to her side. “You know the hard charcoal sticks that artists use to sketch with?”

Richard was frowning. “Sure.”

“Well,” she said, searching for words to explain it, “imagine if the artist were to scribble as fast as he could in the form of a figure, a man. No outlines, no shading or features, simply hundreds of scribbles, back and forth, up and down, round and round, fast as possible, filling in the arms, the body, the legs, and the head to make the dark shape of a man.”

When they only stared at her, she used her hand to demonstrate, as if scribbling in midair. “Like this. Just scribbles over and over and over—fast as you can—so that after a moment on the paper all those scribbles combine into the rough, dark shape of a man. An impression of a man made entirely of scribbles. No outline, no details, just... scribbles.”

Richard was beginning to get the image in his head. “You mean this figure you saw just before the light went out looked kind of fuzzy or something? Sort of dark and shadowy?”

Kahlan was shaking her head. “No, no. Not dark. Not fuzzy. Not shadowy. He was made up of scribbles in midair. Lines. Hundreds of lines. All kinds of loopy scribbles like you would make when holding that

charcoal against the paper and scribbling to fill in a shape as fast as you could.

“As he came toward me, every tiny movement he made as his arms moved, as his legs moved to take a step, he was redrawn with new scribbles. He just kept being redrawn over and over, time after time, over and over every fraction of a second. Those scribbles he was made of came anew so fast it made him sort of blur as he moved.”

Richard suddenly looked over at Shale. “What does that remind you of?”

The blood had drained from her face. “The marks I told you about left in the snow that looked like thousands of strikes from a switch.”

“Or scribbles made in the snow.”

Shale nodded.

Kahlan looked from one to the other. “What are you two talking about? I know it sounds crazy, but do you mean you believe me?”

“We believe you,” Shale said. “I have seen people murdered—likely by this same creature, this scribby man as you call him. Some were clawed to death.”

“He had claws,” Kahlan confirmed, nodding, the haunted fear returning to her eyes. “He stood upright, like a man, but he had claws. Three on each hand. They weren’t black like the rest of him, like the scribbles. They were more defined, thick, solid.”

“What color were they?” Richard asked.

Kahlan rubbed her injured arm hanging at her side as if suddenly chilled. “I don’t know. A lighter color. Sort of a tan or yellowish color.”

“Or sort of golden?” Richard asked.

Her gaze came up to meet his. “I guess so. I only just saw him, saw the claws... and then he was on me... tearing at me, ripping into me. It was terrifying.”

“What do you think it could have been?” Shale asked her, breaking Kahlan’s sudden transfixed daze at the memory. “Do you have any idea at all?”

Kahlan nodded. “I’m afraid I do.” She stared off into the shadows for a time before going on.

“They are the monsters under the bed when you are little, the shape just caught out of the corner of your eye when you thought you were alone, the shadow of something in a dark corner that surprises you and then isn’t

there. They stop you dead with a knot of unexpected terror in the pit of your stomach. We have all seen glimpses of them. Never long enough to see them as I saw them, but it was them. I recognized it the instant I saw it.

“We’ve all seen fleeting flashes of them, the dark shadow just out of sight. They could briefly terrify us before but never hurt us because they came from so far distant. They were never able to fully materialize in our world so we saw only transient glimpses of them, the shape of them if the light was just right, if the shadows were deep enough... if you were afraid enough.

“I think that the star shift has brought us closer to their realm so that they now have the power to step into our world and hurt us.”

14

Angry that Kahlan had been harmed by such a monster, Richard turned to Nolo.

“What was that thing that attacked her?”

Nolo stared blankly, his eyes unblinking, as if he had not heard Richard’s question, or wasn’t even aware there was anyone in the room with him.

“I’ve touched him with my power,” Kahlan reminded him. “Whatever else happened as I did, I still unleashed my power into him. He won’t answer anyone but me.”

“... Or maybe the goddess,” Shale suggested.

Kahlan’s only answer was a worried look.

Richard gestured angrily at the portly man pinned to the wall. “We need answers. Ask him what it was.”

Kahlan moved closer to stand in front of the prisoner.

“Nolo. Look at me.”

He looked up at her as if just coming awake from a deep sleep. Long strands of gray hair meant to cover his large bald spot instead hung down in front of his face. As he saw her, his expression turned to utter devotion to the Confessor who had taken his mind.

Then, a cunning smile thinned his puffy lips.

Richard had seen plenty of people touched by Kahlan’s power.

None of them had ever smiled.

“She sees you,” Nolo said in a raspy whisper.

“She?” Kahlan asked.

“The Golden Goddess. She sees you standing there. She sees into your world.” His voice was slow and sounded different than it had when he was in the great hall. If it even was his voice. “Your world will be hers. You should give it up now, and save yourself witnessing what is to come.”

“Who is the Golden Goddess?” Kahlan asked in a calm voice.

“She is the collector of worlds.”

Richard didn’t like the sound of that.

“What does she want with our world?” Kahlan asked. “Why does she want it?”

“You can’t win in the end,” he said in that slow, raspy whisper, which ran a shiver up Richard’s spine. “He is the last of the Rahl line. You are the last of the Confessors. Once you are both dead she will have your world.”

“Can you get him to be more specific?” Richard asked. “These are just threats. We need something that will help us.”

Kahlan nodded. “How will the Golden Goddess collect our world?”

“She will have your world. You can’t win. In the end, no matter what you do, she will have your world. Running will do you no good. Surrender now and she will kill you first. She will pick your bones clean and then you will not have to see the horror that will come for your people.”

Kahlan shook her head to herself.

It was obvious to Richard that this wasn’t working. “He is not behaving as he should after he has been touched by a Confessor,” he whispered to Shale, standing just to his right.

Without a word, Shale walked briskly up to the man and held his sweaty head tightly between her hands. Fingers spread, she pressed her thumbs against his temples. She lowered her head as she closed her eyes. Nolo’s entire body began to shake, his chins rolled like waves in a storm, his fat belly jiggled, his teeth chattered.

After a few minutes, still holding the man’s quivering head, Shale looked over at Richard. “She is using his vision. She is using him to look out through his eyes into our world.”

“Well... what do we do about it?”

“This,” Shale said.

Without any hesitation she dug her thumbs into the inside corners of his eyes. She gritted her teeth with the effort of scooping out his eyeballs with her thumbs. It was shocking to see such a gorgeous woman engaged in such a brutal act.

Nolo screamed his lungs out as she dug deep with her hooked thumbs. Shale at last ripped the eyeballs out. She pulled them away from the connecting tissues and then held one up in each bloody hand to show them. Nolo shrieked the whole time.

“There. That should fix the problem,” the sorceress announced. She tossed his eyeballs off into a corner and then turned to a surprised Kahlan. “I’ve cut off her link. You will be able to talk to him now. The Golden Goddess is gone. Nolo’s core is yours now to do with as you will.”

Vika, next to Richard’s left shoulder, leaned toward him. “I’m beginning to like her a lot more.”

The other Mord-Sith nodded their eager agreement.

15

The man hanging in the restraints thrashed and screamed with the pain of having his eyes plucked out.

“Nolo, be still and listen,” Kahlan commanded.

His agonized cries died out almost immediately in choking fits. He lifted his head, even though he could no longer see anything. Tears of blood ran from his ruined eye sockets.

“Mistress... please... command me.”

There at last was the person Kahlan’s power had taken. Shale had broken the Golden Goddess’s link to the man. The veneer of her control was gone. Nolo hung nearly naked before the Confessor who had taken him with her power, fat, sweaty, smelly, and now unconditionally compliant.

“Tell me who this Golden Goddess is.”

“She came to haunt me. She made me do things I didn’t want to do,” he confessed in a tearful voice. “I don’t know how.”

“I know that much,” Kahlan said. “What else do you know about her? Tell me who she is.”

“She is from another world. She is a collector of worlds. Her people are marauders. She finds worlds for them to raid.”

“How does she get here?”

“I don’t know, Mistress.” He shrugged in misery because he couldn’t adequately answer the question. “She has looked into our world before, but it was always far too distant for her kind to come here. Now, somehow, our world has come into her realm. It is now within her reach.”

Shale motioned Kahlan to step over to her and Richard, out of earshot of Nolo. “This isn’t making any sense. I can’t believe he is really telling the truth.”

“Someone touched by a Confessor’s power has to tell the truth,” Kahlan said. “They have no choice. Their mind, who they were, is gone. All that is

left is unfiltered devotion to the Confessor who took them and to what she wants to know.”

“That may be, but this can’t be right. It doesn’t make any sense. This Golden Goddess and her people can’t travel to different worlds, or”—she twirled her hand overhead—“roam among the stars. Such a thing is simply not possible.”

“I’m afraid it is,” Richard said, drawing her attention.

“What are you talking about?”

“Kahlan and I have both traveled to a different world.”

“What world?” the frowning sorceress asked.

“The world of the dead,” Richard said. “We went beyond the veil. We left the world of life, went to the world of the dead, and returned to our world.”

“That’s different,” Shale declared in a fit of annoyance. “The world of life and the world of the dead are both here, in the same place at the same time. They are two sides of the same coin. Only the veil separates them. They function together.

“While it may have been an incredible feat, one I don’t entirely understand, it’s very different from what Nolo is talking about. He is saying that the Golden Goddess’s people venture among the stars, visiting other worlds. That’s simply not possible,” she insisted.

Richard hooked his thumbs in his weapon belt. “I’m afraid it is. I know because I’ve done it.”

Shale’s disbelief was obvious. “You’ve traveled to other worlds.”

“Well, not me.”

“I thought not,” she huffed.

“But I’ve sent other people to a different world.”

Taken off guard, the sorceress made a face. “What are you talking about?”

“When we won the war with the Old World and defeated Emperor Jagang there were many people who didn’t want to live here, in a world with magic. That had been what the war had been about—Jagang and his followers wanted to end magic. So, when we won the war, I sent those people who didn’t want to live in a world with magic to, well, another world, a world without magic.”

Shale planted her fists on her hips. “You sent people to another world.”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I used a spectral fold.”

She threw her hands up. “A spectral fold. Of course.” She leaned in with an angry whisper. “What in the name of Creation is a spectral fold?”

“Well,” Richard said as he pinched his lower lip, trying to think how to explain it as simply as possible, “it’s a way of making different worlds that are far away come together so that you can step from one world into the other.”

“Bring worlds together?” She stared with her jaw hanging. She finally gathered her senses. “Have you lost your mind? Such a thing simply isn’t possible.”

“It is,” Kahlan confirmed. “Richard has already done it. I was there. I saw it done.”

“How? And don’t give me any of that spectral-fold nonsense. How could you bring another world, a distant world, together with our world so that you could step from one to another?”

“Here is the easiest way I can explain it. Imagine if you took a piece of paper and put a dot of ink on one side at the edge and then turned the paper over and put another dot on the other side of the paper, but on the edge farthest away from the first dot. You might say they are worlds apart and on opposite sides of the paper. Right? How could you bring those dots—those worlds—together?”

After a moment of thought, Shale folded her arms across her breasts. “You can’t. You can’t bring things together that are physically separated like that.”

“Yes you can. You simply fold the paper around into a cylinder until the dots touch. Dots on different edges, and different sides of the paper, now touch each other.” Richard smiled. “A spectral fold.”

Shale looked off into the distance as she puzzled it out in her head. Finally, once she grasped the concept, she turned back to regard him for a moment with a stern scowl.

“You are a scary man, Richard Rahl.”

“War wizards are supposed to be scary. Part of the job.”

Shale seemed to compose herself as she came to grips with the notion of moving between worlds. “And so you think that is what the Golden

Goddess and her people can do? A spectral fold? Bring our worlds together and simply step out of one and into the other?”

Richard shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m only saying that I know it’s possible to go between worlds because I’ve sent people from our world to another one. My half sister wanted to go to that world to start a new life. She left this world and went to that one to live without magic. So what I’m saying is that we can’t discount what Nolo is telling us about them coming here from another world simply because we don’t know how they’re doing it.”

Shale nodded, still thinking of how to reconcile what he had just told her with what she knew. She had a sudden thought.

“What if the scribbly man the Mother Confessor saw, and the tracks I told you about, are them in the process of stepping through. You know, like they are still in that interface between worlds. What if that was what Kahlan saw—one of them in the midst of coming into our world? What if what she saw was him still in transition between worlds?”

Kahlan looked between Shale and Richard. “That actually might make sense. It didn’t seem like he was, I don’t know, all there, I guess you could say. Maybe he was in the process of materializing here. Before our worlds were close enough, they used to try and we would only see a glimmer of them. Now they can come through, so that’s what I saw here.”

Richard considered it a moment. “That certainly might explain it. Why don’t you see what else we can learn from Nolo?”

Kahlan left the two of them to go back to stand before the prisoner. “How will the Golden Goddess try to take our world?”

Nolo struggled to shrug against his helpless fear that he couldn’t properly answer her. “I’m not sure, Mistress—I swear! I do know that she doesn’t understand our world.”

“What do you mean? Our language? Our ways? What doesn’t she understand?”

“No, not those things. Of all the worlds she has found and raided, she has never before encountered a world like ours.”

“You already said that.” Kahlan made a face. “What doesn’t she understand about our world?”

He cried out in terror that he had displeased her by not answering in the way she wished. “Forgive me, Mistress!”

“Pay attention. Answer the question. She has never encountered a world like ours. What has she never encountered before? What doesn’t she understand?”

“Magic.”

Kahlan was taken aback. “She doesn’t understand magic?”

“She has never before encountered a world with magic. The gift—magic—confuses her. She has never seen magic before. She does not understand it.”

Kahlan paused to look over at Richard. This was certainly unexpected. Then again, in a way, it wasn’t. It was entirely possible that magic was unique to their world alone.

“The world Lord Rahl sent those people to was a world without magic,” Shale whispered. “Her world must be like that. That would explain why she doesn’t understand magic.”

Kahlan nodded her agreement before she turned back to Nolo. “Does she fear it? Does she fear magic?”

“She doesn’t know what it is. She is wary of it because it is an unknown to her. She fears you. You have power she cannot comprehend. That is why she tried to kill you, earlier. She will have you dead. But there is one thing she fears more than you and your power.”

“What would that be?”

“She fears the shiny man most of all.”

16

Kahlan frowned and leaned in as if she hadn't heard him correctly. "She fears what?"

"The shiny man." He tilted his head in Richard's direction. "Lord Rahl."

"She fears Lord Rahl most of all?"

Nolo nodded as he cried out, "Yes!"

"Why does she call him the shiny man?"

"His magic. His abilities. His power. His gift. His sword. Everything about him strengthens the magic of this world—especially his bond as the Lord Rahl with his people. That bond is open-ended, without limits. The shiny man lights this world with this strange thing: magic."

"How could his gift give the magic of this world strength?"

"The same way his bond powers the Agiel of the Mord-Sith in ways that we cannot see. But she sees it shining. She sees the shiny threads of it."

"Magic shrouds this world, veils it, obscuring her ability to see into it very well. For that reason she uses people here, peering out through their eyes, like she was seeing through my eyes in the great hall when I came before you to give you her demand that you surrender. She was watching you both through my eyes. Through that imperfect, murky vision of looking through another's eyes—through my eyes—she couldn't see what Lord Rahl really looks like. His gift makes him look shiny to her. That terrible shine hurts her vision. No one else looks like that to her, just him. That's why she calls him the shiny man."

Richard remembered the way Nolo had kept looking away from him in the great hall, avoiding eye contact. This would explain why.

"So she hates him," Kahlan said, "because of his gift."

"Oh yes," Nolo said, nodding furiously. "She hates him. She wants him dead. Your magic reinforces his gift. She hates you. She wants you dead."

Once you both are dead then this confusing shroud of magic around this world will fade away and her hordes will have free run.”

“But our magic protects us. Lord Rahl’s magic can defeat them.”

“Forgive me, Mistress, for not being clear,” he whined. “They don’t understand magic, so they are cautious... for now. But don’t mistake caution for fear and especially not for weakness. They are anything but weak.”

“Up to now she has only allowed a few of her kind through to our world, like the one who attacked you. Allowed them to come here to hunt, to feed, to probe, mostly far away from you both, far away from your magic, to test our species. As she learns more about our world, she will send more of her kind.”

“But my magic protected me?”

“During that moment when one of hers struck out at you, it was because you were at your weakest, but even so your magic kept the one who came from being bold enough to slaughter you as swiftly as she had intended.”

“What exactly is their purpose, though? Their objective?”

“Her kind considers us an inferior species. We are prey. They will hunt us like game. They will hunt us in ways we cannot even begin to imagine. Other worlds are merely sport to them. We are a new kind of species, a new kind of prey, one that is difficult to chase down and kill, one that has this strange thing, magic. All that makes us a new kind of sport for them, a more challenging sport. That excites them.”

“There must be a way for us to show her that we are intelligent, thinking beings,” Kahlan said. “You’re a diplomat, tell us how we can reason with them to reach a peace between our worlds.”

“Peace is repugnant to them. They regard themselves as a race of gods. They don’t live in peace with any inferior species. They hunt them.”

Richard thought it ironic that the consul general, a man whose life had been devoted to diplomacy and negotiation in pursuit of peace, was explaining why there could be no peace with these beings.

Kahlan still wasn’t convinced. “There must be a way to persuade them that hunting the people here isn’t right, that there are better ways to deal with each other even if we are different, even if they think we are inferior to them.”

Nolo had been shaking his head as she spoke. “You are still thinking of them in human terms. They are not human. They are not anything like us. I don’t know what they are but I do know they are not like us. They even reproduce differently.”

“What do you mean, they reproduce differently?”

“For them reproduction does not involve bonding or love or any kind of pleasure. They simply replicate more of their kind through some sort of process as necessary to maintain their supremacy. They get no pleasure or satisfaction from it, and certainly no joy. There is no bonding with those they create.

“The pleasure for their species comes from the singular act of inflicting terror and then killing their prey. The best way to explain it is that terrorizing prey is for them much the same pleasure we get from the act of sex. Bringing terror is a complex act to them, filled with nuance and excitement. After a period of this enjoyment building up from inflicting terror, killing, you might say, is their form of orgasm.

“Sometimes they eat what they kill, sometimes they don’t. Either way, the object is terror and then the climax of killing. That is the central pursuit of their lives, much like some depraved individuals here are driven to get sick pleasure out of torturing and killing animals. We are just animals to the goddess and her kind. They have no empathy for prey.”

“So they prey on other worlds?” Kahlan asked.

“Yes. They search the worlds among the stars for hunting grounds. They have been to our world before, but it has always been too distant a place to come to and hunt successfully, or even visit except for the briefest of moments. Too short a time to kill. Now, our world has somehow come within reach. Now, they can prey on us.”

“It is only magic, then, keeping them from flooding in and slaughtering us all?”

“Yes, Mistress. Only the magic of this world gives the goddess pause—but only for the time being. You may not realize it, but only the power of the shiny man and you, Mistress, hold that net of magic together around our world. You two are the nexus of magic in our world. Lord Rahl’s bond, as shown through the devotion, gives strength and energy to the web of magic. Your gifts are what binds all kinds of magic together in countless ways and keeps it viable.

“Even so, as soon as they learn more, her kind will use this world as they have used others within their grasp—for the sport of killing.”

“But surely she must know that we aren’t going to let that happen. We will fight back.”

Nolo nodded. “She is counting on that. Your defiance piques their interest. They know we have weapons and that we are often warlike. The shiny man is a war wizard, after all. The resistance that would be put up by our kind excites them, draws them. It will bring more numbers than usual. It will drive them to stalk every person in this world and hunt us to extinction.

“In the end, there can be no salvation for our world. If you do not surrender, she will become bolder and then hunt you both down and kill you. If for some reason you could elude her, even that is not a problem. If she so decided, she has but to wait. It is only a matter of time.”

“What do you mean, wait?” Kahlan asked. “Wait for what?”

“Wait for you both to die. Each of you is the last of your kind. The last Confessor, the last Lord Rahl.

“When you die—whether she kills you, or something else does, or you die of natural causes like old age—then the obstacle of magic will crumble. Once it does, we will then be like any other world. They will drink our blood and eat our flesh and spit out the bones. When they have eventually finished us off, they will move on to another world.”

“Maybe she will die before we do,” Kahlan said. “Richard and I aren’t that old yet. We have our lives before us. Maybe she is older than we are and she will go first. That means she can’t really afford to wait.”

“No, Mistress. She is already many times older than you, and she is only now entering the prime of her life, in many ways the same as you and Lord Rahl. The difference is she will outlive you both by centuries.

“Even when she eventually dies, others of her kind will take her place as she took the place of those before her. Having this world is not so much her objective as it is the driving force of her species. She will outlive you if necessary and then when magic dies they will have our world.

“Time is on their side.”

Kahlan touched the square neckline of her Confessor’s dress over the spot where Richard had pulled out the knife. “So, since this superior species failed to finish the kill, that’s why you stepped in and stabbed me.” It was not a question.

Nolo's face twisted with horror at the sudden mention of what he had done. "Yes, Mistress," he answered in a whimper.

Kahlan looked puzzled. "How were you able to stab me after I used my power on you?"

He sobbed and trembled at what he had done.

"Answer me," Kahlan said in a deadly calm voice that matched her Confessor face.

"Forgive me, Mistress, but that was not me, that was the goddess using me. The one she sent pulled back to their world before you were dead. She wanted to finish it. She wanted you dead. She didn't care how so she forced me ahead, forced my hand to drive the knife toward you. You blocked me. We fought, and even though you only had one good arm, you managed to get the knife away from me. You stabbed me—as you should have, Mistress. But with the goddess guiding me in the pitch blackness, as you came at me again I was able to twist the knife away from your grip. Once I had it, it was the goddess driving my hand to plunge the knife into you. It was the goddess, not me, Mistress. The superior species, not me. Thank the Creator it missed your heart and you weren't killed. Please, Mistress, I am telling you the truth."

"Where is she?"

Richard could tell that Kahlan was getting tired and frustrated.

"Where is this goddess?" she asked.

"In her world, Mistress."

"But where is that—where is her world?"

Nolo started to weep. "I don't know, Mistress," he said in a pitiful whine. "Forgive me, Mistress, I don't know how she moves from world to world. I don't understand those abilities any more than she understands magic. One way or another she will outlive you and then they will have our world."

"There is a flaw in her plan." Kahlan lifted her head a little. "Lord Rahl and I can have children."

"Children?" he said, leaning forward as much as the restraints allowed, as if staring with his bloody eye sockets.

"Yes, children," she said. "Those children will carry the power of the Rahl line and the Confessors. That's how it has always worked. That is how it was passed down to us. That is how magic will go on to survive in our world. Our magic will continue unbroken through them. It will always help

to keep her kind away from our people. Magic will pass on and always protect our world.”

Again he shook his head. “She sees that you have been together for enough time to have reproduced. She sees that you have failed to breed successfully and bring forth successors as others of our kind have. As mates, you both have proven to be barren. She sees that your lines of magic are dead ends, that your world is nearly ripe for the taking.”

Seeing Kahlan standing there, in a dungeon, discussing such personal matters with this man who had tried to kill her made Richard feel profoundly sorry for her. The war had robbed them of the chance to have children. She never mentioned it, but he knew how devastated she had been to have lost the child the one time she had been pregnant. And then the world had nearly come apart. With their lives drawn into so much terror and death, they could hardly bring a child into the world.

He had been hoping that the new golden age would finally provide that opportunity for a family, but now, with this dire threat from the Golden Goddess... it looked like their chance for children had just slipped away.

“Just because we haven’t had children yet,” Kahlan said, “doesn’t mean that we couldn’t still have children to carry on our lines.”

“She does not care.”

Kahlan blinked. “Why wouldn’t she care—that would ruin her whole plan to outlive our gift?”

“She does not care because the young of any species are commonly helpless, ours especially so. You may be hard to kill, but young ones are easy to kill. They do not yet have magic that can protect them. Infants are even easier to slaughter. Her kind lusts to kill the young of any species because they more easily succumb to helpless terror.

“If you were to have children that would only serve to excite their prey drive even more. Your children would be irresistible to her. She would come for them, magic or no magic, and she would kill them the way we would step on a cockroach.”

Tears welled up in Kahlan’s eyes, fury twisted her features as her hands fisted at her sides. “I want your Golden Goddess dead! I want you dead!”

Richard straightened, not expecting her sudden proclamation.

At her words, blood began to run from the man’s ears. His body shuddered violently, and then he slumped heavily in the restraints. Once

touched by a Confessor's power, a person lived only to serve her. If she wished them dead, they complied without hesitation.

She had just wished him dead. It was as an execution.

This man had tried to kill her. He had driven his knife into her chest in the hope of stabbing her through the heart, even if with the Golden Goddess commanding him. For that, Richard wasn't at all displeased that he was dead. But he had the larger picture in mind.

He stepped close to put a hand on her shoulder. "Kahlan, why would you kill him? He may have been able to provide more information."

"The goddess will grant no mercy," she said as tears ran down her cheeks. "Neither will I."

That was the iron will that inspired them all and had helped win the war. Although he would have liked to have access to more information, Richard wouldn't change her for anything.

He could see that the ordeal, both physical and emotional, had drained what strength she had left. Her face grew ashen.

And then he saw a wet red stain at her side spreading through the white dress.

Shale rushed forward to help him just as Kahlan collapsed.

17

Even though she knew she was in a deep sleep, Kahlan could hear herself screaming.

The pain was unbearable. She wanted to die just to end the agony, but in the strange, confusing landscape of dreams, death eluded her.

She had been in this place before, in this strange, twisted world of abject agony that distorted everything into one single, focused fixation on wanting the pain to stop. She begged for the pain to stop, but the blanket of sleep only helped to keep her immobilized and helpless.

Her hands gripped fistfuls of the bedsheets. She twisted her fists as the pain twisted in her. She panted as fast as she could, trying to get the air she so desperately needed but failing. She thought she might suffocate in that state of powerless burning need.

Somewhere in the distance she heard a comforting voice reassuring her. It sounded like a good spirit. That thought jolted her with a new fear—a fear that she was already dead.

She realized, then, that in death such worldly pain would be a thing of the past. She knew firsthand that death held its own agonies, but physical pain was not one of them.

Kahlan began, then, to feel the suffering starting to wane. It was the greatest blessing possible to have the pain ease, even if only a little. Gradually, her screams died down to moans until after a while she could begin to catch her breath. Even through the haze of sleep, she was aware of at last being able to breathe again.

As the pain abated bit by bit, it allowed her to drift off into a deeper, more normal sleep, where everything faded away into a dream world of every worry, every bizarre, warped fear all blended together into the kind of stark fright unique to dreams.

Her deepest personal fears, fears that were new to her, would not leave her be, even in sleep. Not after what Nolo had told her.

After a seeming eternity spent in that suspended dream state, her eyes finally opened. She was covered in a sheen of sweat. She pulled the neck of the nightdress up, trying to cool herself. She knew she had been asleep for quite some time, but she had no idea how long it had been. The heavy drapes were drawn, so she didn't know if it was day or night, but at least she was in their bedroom, where she was safe.

Kahlan lifted her head a little and saw that Shale was sitting close by in a comfortable chair, her head slumped, her eyes closed, her breathing even. The woman was gallingly beautiful, with that kind of feminine voice that made Kahlan think she sounded like a frog in comparison. How was it fair that such an alluring woman could have a voice like that?

Kahlan wondered if Richard thought the sorceress was beautiful. She knew he had to.

She smiled to herself then, knowing that Richard thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world. Sometimes she thought she must have tricked him into thinking that. It was a wonderful feeling, though, having him be obsessed with her. It was a wonderful feeling being obsessed with him.

She wanted nothing more right then than to hold him, than to tell him. But how could she? She wished more than anything that she hadn't yelled at him.

When she tried to sit up and an unexpected pain made her gasp, Shale's eyes opened. The sorceress rushed to sit on the edge of the bed.

Kahlan felt a keen sense of comfort to have the woman close.

Shale put a compassionate hand on Kahlan's arm as she smiled down at her. "There you are." She smoothed Kahlan's hair back from her forehead. "There you are." She looked relieved and radiantly happy to see that Kahlan was alive.

Kahlan took up the sorceress's hand in both of hers and held it against her cheek. Her gratitude for Shale saving her life seemed unable to be expressed in any other way.

"Where's Richard?" Kahlan finally asked. "Where are the Mord-Sith?"

"I made Richard go get some sleep by threatening to use a spell to put him down if he didn't do it voluntarily. He grumbled but complied. The

Mord-Sith wanted to stay, but I find it an uneasy feeling to do a healing that makes people scream in pain when their protectors are nearby with Agiel in their fists. I made them go get some sleep, too.”

That made Kahlan smile. She put a hand across her middle. “If you healed me, why do I still hurt?”

“Because your abdominal muscles have been cramping against the things I’ve had to do. They are just exhausted, that’s all. Nothing to be concerned about. I’ve healed all your injuries and drawn out the poison left by the claws of that thing that attacked you.”

“Thing?”

“You called it the scribbly man.”

Kahlan nodded at the memory. “Right.”

Kahlan squeezed Shale’s hand. She felt a deep bond with the woman who had healed her. Healing often formed that kind of closeness. The deeper the healing, the deeper the sense of connection.

“Thank you,” she said. It didn’t begin to seem like enough.

“Glad I could help, and I’m thankful that you are well. It saved my life, too.”

Kahlan’s brow bunched. “What do you mean?”

“If I had let you die, that man of yours would have skinned me alive and fed my hide to the vultures.”

Kahlan smiled. She squinted around in the muted light. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Two nights and one day between them. It’s not yet sunrise.”

Kahlan put a hand to her forehead. “Dear spirits...”

As she tried to sit up, Shale gently pushed her back down. “You needed the rest. Don’t be eager to get up too quickly. First get used to being whole again. There is no rush.”

Kahlan tested her left arm. It felt normal.

“Is Richard all right?” she asked, looking up with sudden worry. “Have there been any more attacks?”

“One,” Shale said. “Lord Rahl put his sword through it and the door behind. His reaction was instantaneous, but it was gone as soon as it appeared. I don’t know if it was harmed, but I can tell you that the door will never be the same. That man has some muscles on him.”

Kahlan couldn’t help smiling. “Yes he does.”

She didn't know if she should feel proud of Richard for Shale noticing, or jealous that she did.

"But he's all right? It didn't hurt him?"

Shale smiled her assurance. "He's fine, if a bit frazzled about you. So far the Golden Goddess has not caused any further trouble."

"But she will," Kahlan said.

"Your man will fight her. That is what a war wizard does."

Kahlan smiled at the mental image of him. "He is our protector." He was everything to her.

Shale nodded. "Yes, he is quite the man." She let out a deep sigh. "I have to say, that kind of man could make my toes curl, if you know what I mean."

That unwelcome mental image taunted Kahlan's jealousy out of the corner. She didn't say anything.

A curious hint of a smile grew on Shale's perfect features. "Does he do that for you? Make your toes curl and your eyes roll back in your head as the muscles in your legs turn to stone?"

Taken off guard by such a personal question, Kahlan didn't answer. But Shale's smile widened when Kahlan blushed.

"He is my world," Kahlan said. "He is everything to me."

Shale lifted an eyebrow. "Then why haven't you told him?"

If Kahlan had blushed before, now she felt her face burning.

"You know?"

"Of course I know. In healing you I am aware of things like that."

Kahlan let her head sink back against the pillow as she closed her eyes.

"Dear spirits, how can I tell him, now? He promised a new golden age. I was so happy. I was about to tell him... but then when I saw everything falling apart because of the Golden Goddess, I blamed him. I was so angry at him, as if it was all his fault. I accused him of lying to me. I was so excited, and then all of a sudden I was so angry at seeing our happiness evaporate before my eyes. I blamed him."

"It's understandable," Shale assured her. "He knows that you don't really blame him or think he was deceiving you. In your condition it's normal to be more emotional. Once you tell him he will understand and everything will be right between you again."

“I was pregnant once before,” Kahlan said as she rolled her head away from the sorceress. “I lost the baby. We were both devastated. Now...”

“Now you will finally be a mother, Mother Confessor.”

Kahlan looked back at her. “How can I bring a child into a world only to have it hunted and slaughtered by the Golden Goddess? How can I bring a child into a world full of trouble?”

“It’s not like you have a choice.”

Kahlan shook her head. “I don’t know how I can tell him now.”

“Well, he is going to find out eventually.”

“I know, but...” Kahlan forced out a breath in frustration. “When Nolo said they would kill our child, I lost it. All I could think about was our child, our new life just starting to grow in me, and then...”

“Our child would be butchered by those heartless beings. How can I burden Richard with such a worry? With this unexpected trouble how can I tell him I’m pregnant with our child?”

Shale had the oddest look on her face, but she didn’t say anything.

“Don’t you see,” Kahlan pressed. “Our world needs both of us now more than ever. We can ill afford a distraction like this. Everyone’s life is at stake. This would cripple our ability to protect people.”

“Magic helps protect our world. In order for magic to continue, for Lord Rahl’s power, for your power, to continue and protect future generations, you must.”

“I know, but someday. Not now, when our child would be hunted by vicious predators.”

“You and Lord Rahl are not helpless. You must fight for your right to happiness and for our way of life. That is the way of the world. When is it ever a good time?”

“Yes, but don’t you see? This is different with the Golden Goddess and her kind suddenly coming for us. I’m terrified to bring a child into the world right now. I’m terrified for that child.”

Shale seemed to glow with a serene smile.

“Not just a child, Kahlan.”

Kahlan frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Twins.”

Kahlan blinked. “What?”

Shale put a hand over Kahlan's belly. "You are going to have twins. A boy and a girl."

The story continues.

Episode 2 of the Children of D'Hara

HATEFUL THINGS

coming soon...

About Terry Goodkind



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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