Terms of Service
TERMS OF SERVICE

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http://valdyas.org/irina/books/senthi.html

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Cover art by Andreas Raninger.
To

Caroline Stevermer

who I want to be when I grow up

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Chapter 1

There was a strange buzz in the air in the Temple, as if something was going to happen that the novices weren't being told about. They were used to not being told about certain rituals by now; some of those were only for confirmed priestesses with markings on their wrists and arms. This time, though, it was different. Senthi had the feeling that the older priestesses purposely avoided telling them anything.

One evening Erne told them to fast: the first time they had even been permitted. They weren't allowed to attend the evening service. Instead, they went to bed silently, each one wrapped in her own thoughts. The foreboding was so strong that it kept Senthi half awake. Some of the others were tossing and turning as well.

Morning came far too soon. Erne came into their room with an armful of new robes, temple robes like those the older priestesses wore, black on the left side, white on the right. They'd been sewing the things for weeks without knowing that they were to be their own. The novice mistress put a finger to her lips and they put on the new robes in silence, then followed her to the temple in total darkness.

Senthi could sense that the temple was already full of people, but it was too dark to see anything except the lined face of the High Priestess, illuminated from below by the bowl of glowing charcoal in front of her. They said she was a hundred years old. Senthi could easily believe it. The High Priestess looked more like her idea of Naigha than the statue did.
Erne put the novices in a half-circle facing the High Priestess and took Jerna by the hand first, leading her to the little table with the bowl of charcoal. There were things lying on it that glittered in the firelight. The High Priestess gave an almost imperceptible sign and Erne started to do something to Jerna's right hand with the glittering things. Senthi felt that Jerna was in pain, but it didn't become clear to her what was going on until she saw the back of Erne's own hand as she worked. She was putting the snake mark on Jerna's hand.

It took an interminable time. Nobody spoke. At last, Erne took Jerna back to her place in the circle and led Rusla forward. They were going strictly in order of age. Again, the glittering, the pain, the silence.

Arvi was next, poised as always, as if she was already a priestess like her mother. Rava was apprehensive --Senthi could almost smell her fear-- but she became calmer with Erne working on her. Maile, the last before Senthi, gave a little gasp when the marking started. It sounded like a great crash in the silent temple.

Maile came back --she held her right hand stiffly in front of her and there were tears on her cheeks-- and then Erne took Senthi's hand and made her kneel in front of the little table. The glittering things turned out to be a silver flask with a stopper, a silver-handled brush, silver needles on a softly gleaming black silk cloth and a silver dish filled with a fine dark powder.

Erne held a needle over the glowing charcoal for a while and rubbed it with a cloth. She took Senthi's right hand in her left and pricked the skin, quickly and deftly, like someone pricking biscuits before baking to keep them flat. Senthi felt the needle go in and come out, but it didn't hurt. There was a voice in her head saying that it didn't hurt. There was a very distinctive voice in her head, a voice that seemed to come from--

Don't faint, said the voice in her head. If you can control pain, you can control consciousness.

Senthi found that it was true. She watched the rest of the process with growing fascination. Little drops of blood started welling up from her skin. Erne went all the way around her wrist and ended on top again. She put something from the stoppered flask on the cloth. Senthi detected
thyme and sage in the smell, but there was something else that she didn't recognise, a very faint trace of something sweet and heavy.

*That would kill you*, the voice in her head said, *if it was twice as much.*

Erne rubbed the blood off. There must have been spirit of wine in the potion, because it stung. It still didn't hurt, though, not really; the stinging wasn't more than a gentle tingle. Senthi's hand became heavy. Erne dipped the brush in the dark powder and dusted the prickings with it. The head of a snake appeared on the back of her hand, starkly outlined in black dotted lines and filled with subtle patterns.

Senthi expected to be led back to her place, but Erne took her left hand and started on that. Senthi started to panic: twice as much of the potion would kill her, the voice had said, and she was going to have another dose on this hand. She wished there was a way to consult the voice. Clearly the voice was listening to her thoughts, because it said, *You will be ill, but I can keep you from dying.*

Her entire right arm was growing heavy now, the heaviness spreading to the shoulder. She was still keeping herself conscious, but it took so much effort that she barely noticed Erne finishing her left hand and rubbing it with yet more poisonous potion. As she stumbled back to her place in the circle, her left hand began to grow heavy too. She swayed, lost her firmness of will, and keeled over, oblivious.

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Senthi woke in a small unfamiliar room. She was in a high bed with scratchy sheets and someone was sitting beside her. The someone seemed to be shrouded in a sort of luminous mist, but after a while she could make out that it was the High Priestess. She looked less old and forbidding than she had in the temple, but still old and forbidding enough to make Senthi want to kneel to her. Only she couldn't: her body wouldn't respond.

"You're a very strong young woman," the High Priestess said.

Senthi made an effort to say something. "Don't try. Think it and I'll hear you. I heard you before, didn't I?"
Yes. It was surprisingly difficult to think to someone deliberately. *How am I strong? I fainted.*

"You didn't faint until the very end." The High Priestess took Senthi's hand --she hadn't noticed until now that it was bandaged-- and looked her in the eyes. *My name is Airyn.*

The name was rarely used. Senthi suspected that there were people in the Temple who didn't know it, people who weren't even novices any more. *Thank you. Mine is Senthi. May I ask questions?*

"Of course."

*Did you have to keep me from dying?*

"Yes." Her voice was matter-of-fact, as if she kept people from dying all the time. And perhaps she did, being High Priestess of Naigha.

*Why did Erne do both of my hands?*

"Because I told her to. You have the gift."

If the gift was what had made Senthi hear Airyn's voice in her head, and Airyn had told Erne, then Erne must have the gift too. Unless Airyn had told Erne before the service. *When?*

"When I saw you in the temple."

*Is the left hand for having the gift?*

"For things of the spirit." Senthi didn't understand that completely, but it did explain why all the older priestesses had markings on the left arm as well as the right. Being a priestess meant doing things of the spirit. *Semsin*, it must be, though she knew that the Temple and the Guilds had very different ways of dealing with that.

"Erne will tell you." The High Priestess stood up stiffly. "You are to learn. She will teach you." She touched Senthi between the eyes with a fingertip, very softly, and Senthi found that she could not keep her eyes open.

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The next time Senthi awoke, Maile was at her bedside with a steaming bowl of soup and a skirtful of bread and apples. There was something strange about her that Senthi couldn't place.

Maile grinned. "Hungry?"

"Ravenous." Maile helped her sit up, but her arms were still too heavy to hold the bowl or the spoon. "You'll have to feed me like a baby." The words came out haltingly, and it was hard to eat the soup, but she did feel better after she'd finished the bowl. "What did they tell you?" she asked.

"That you had a double dose of the potion because Erne did both your hands, and you fainted from it. We all fainted, in fact, but you were out for two solid days."

Two days! No wonder she was hungry. "Ai- the High Priestess said she saved my life."

"She did, it seems. What we got on one hand is about as much as a person can take and stay alive. Erne told us what it's for, but I was fainting right then and I don't remember." Maile's hand was already out of the bandage and the snake showed black against her skin.

"But what did she do?" Senthi wanted to jump up with urgency, but her body still didn't cooperate.

"Don't know. Talked to Naigha, I suppose. Aunt Airyn can do that."

"The High Priestess is your aunt?"

"Great-aunt. Mother's great-aunt, really. She's been in the Temple forever. She must be ninety at least." Maile was starting on an apple now, confident that Senthi couldn't eat it. She gave her some of the bread, at least. "It runs in the family. First girl gets the fish stall, second goes into the Temple. I'm glad my sister is older, I like this much better."

"Do you know you're all lit up?" Senthi suddenly asked.

"What?"

"You've got light around you. I've only just noticed. I think it must be your anie, but I've never seen it like that before."

"Well, Erne said that you're gifted. It figures. Nobody else in our year is, it seems."
"Jerna will be green with envy."

"She is. To hear her talk you don't have any right to it."
Chapter 2

"Calesh, it's called," Cynla said. "It's made from the roots of this plant."
She pointed it out in the herbal, a spindly bush with hardly any leaves, long sharp-looking thorns and, surprisingly, large soft pink flowers on the very top. "It defends itself from animals that want to eat it by being very poisonous. One prick with a thorn will kill a deer or a camel."

"Teacher? What's a camel?"

"I'll show you. Will you get the bestiary, please, Senthi?"

Senthi got the heavy book from the shelf and Cynla showed them the camel. It looked like a strangely humped sheep with a shaggy coat and long legs. The one in the picture had a disdainful expression on its face.

"Camels can eat the flowers and stems without adverse effects, but if they prick themselves on the thorns they die. It's the same with people. Taken in wine it strengthens the senses, but in the blood it kills."

"Then why aren't we all dead?" Arvi asked. "Senthi did almost die."

"There is only one drop of this oil in the potion Erne rubbed your hands with," Cynla said, taking a glass vial from the carved wooden box that she'd brought into the classroom. The vial was almost full of a straw-yellow transparent liquid. The backs of Senthi's hands began to tingle when she thought of the potion. "One drop to a pint of extract of sage and thyme in watered-down spirit of wine. You could drink all of it and only get very drunk." They giggled. "But as Senthi experienced, get too much
of it in your blood even at this strength and you're dead. It does strengthen the senses, you've all seen that."

Senthi's hands still tingled, and there was also something at the back of her mind that tingled and demanded attention. *It strengthens the senses.* It was true that all her senses had been more acute since she'd come back to life in Airyn's anteroom. *Have I really been dead? Or only nearly so?* In any case Naigha hadn't wanted her yet, or Airyn had convinced Naigha that she didn't.

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Learning *sensin* from Erne meant some lessons for her alone, some with half a dozen other priestesses, all with the same gift but at different stages of learning.

The first few lessons weren't much different from what they'd all had to learn at the beginning: to be completely still, become one with the world and find the essence of her being inside herself. But now she had to learn to perceive it with more than her physical senses, to reach out and grasp it with a hand that was made of *anea* rather than flesh.

"You're holding yourself back," Erne said. "You're not allowing yourself to do it. Imagine it, and it will become real inside yourself; you can depend on that. Find your own images."

Senthi suddenly remembered Aunt Moyri, who had called her spooked. That was when she had first sat like this, on a willow tree that leaned over the shallow water, looking in on herself. That must have been the moment she found her gift, only she hadn't known that she'd found it or even that there was something to find.

She took a deep breath and tried to go back to that moment in her mind.

*I am here. I am Senthi.* There was another presence there, a presence like a breath of fresh air, like the first green of spring. She tried to see it, but it was behind her no matter how she turned. *Timoine,* she thought, half-consciously. The presence quivered a little, as if it was giggling.
There was silent encouragement from Erne. *Yes. That's the way to do it.* But Timoine? When she'd been dedicated to Naigha?

*You don't lose me that easily,* the presence said.

Erne seemed not to have noticed the presence; at least she didn't say anything about it. "Tell me," she said, "what is it that makes you stronger when you're inside yourself? Where do you get power from?"

Senthí studied her inner place for a while and came up with an answer she hadn't expected. "From the earth. Like a tree. Like having roots."

"Hmm. Do you have to be on solid ground?"

"It worked when I was up in the tree. But the tree was rooted, of course."

"Can you do it here? In this room?"

"You mean, get power without being inside myself?"

"Yes."

That was harder than it seemed. Every time Senthí tried, the inner place came to the front of her mind: normal arms and legs and senses worked in the outside world, anie senses only in the inner world. It was frustrating. She sweated and grunted, and only when she thought she would drop with exhaustion she felt a trickle of power coming through the floor, through the soles of her feet. "Hey! It works!"

Erne smiled. "Practise that. Don't practise until you drop, though."

It became easier with practice. It was easiest on the ground itself, out of doors, without a floor between her and the earth; a stone floor was better than a wooden one, and if there was a cellar under the floor the air in it blocked the power almost completely. It was exhilarating to feel the flow, the currents of power, but it took her a long time to learn to tap more than she expended to get at the source.

"You'll learn," Erne said. "Now try to use that power. Make something of it. A cloak to wrap yourself in if you don't want to be seen. Or use it to make yourself larger if you do want to be seen."

*So that's how the High Priestess manages to look so tall,* Senthí thought. Now that was something worth learning.
The novices were sitting on the low wall of the herb garden, darning stockings and talking, when Cynla rushed out of the kitchen. "Anyone here who's had the red fever?"

"Me," said Senthi, and Arvi too, at the same time.

"Put on your black robes and come along, then. River people, both of you?" They nodded. "Yes, they get it first. I have a woman who died of it and her son is still sick. We can't have the whole Temple coming down with it."

It was Senthi's first funeral. Arvi seemed to know exactly what to do: she'd probably helped her mother more times than she could count. The house was in disarray --the servants had fled from the sickness-- but this was not the time to do anything about that.

The widower and his elder son had washed the body and wrapped it in a sheet. All that was left for the priestesses was the ritual, not enough work for all of them. Cynla sent Senthi and Arvi to look after the younger boy, who was in bed upstairs fighting his fever. He was thrashing and throwing the sheets off, burning hot, with the red spots all over his body. They washed him with tepid water, getting the sheets wet, but those needed changing anyway. Cooler, he calmed down a little and opened his swollen eyes. Senthi was on that side. "Nice hair," he said and fell asleep.

Arvi looked at Senthi across the bed and rolled her eyes.

Senthi stayed with the boy while Cynla and Arvi took the woman's body to the vault with the men trailing behind. At times he seemed almost coherent, but every now and again his fever rose and he flailed and shouted. She sponged him down every time he seemed too hot to touch.

Sometimes the boy talked to Senthi and she talked back, but she was sure he wouldn't remember anything. What he said didn't make sense anyway. She wished she dared go to the kitchen to see if there were any healing herbs in the house, but she didn't want to leave him for fear he'd fall out of bed. Anyway, she wasn't good enough at herbs yet to recognise them if they weren't labelled. She stayed at his side.
Swollen and flushed as the boy's face was, she could see that he was handsome: well-shaped cheekbones, friendly brown eyes, curly brown hair that probably would not stay in place even when it was clean and brushed instead of matted with sweat. She smoothed it off his sweaty forehead and it sprang right back.

Eventually the others came back, Arvi carrying the rolled-up empty bier over her shoulder. Cynla took one look at the boy and said, "You two go home, I'll stay. You can come again tomorrow. Just a moment while I write a list of herbs. Get someone to bring them. No, one of you should bring them. Go to the bath-house first and scrub." She handed them bath tokens, then wrote quickly in her almost illegible scrawl. Arvi read the list aloud to make sure.

They scrubbed, washed one another's hair, and realised that they had nothing to wear except the robes they'd been in the contaminated house in. "We'll have to get our other robes and wash again," Arvi said.

"Is it that bad?"

"You carry it in your clothes. Didn't they burn all your things when you'd had it? Clothes, sheets, the lot?"

"Just boiled them in a kettle, I think."

"Yes, that works too, we'll have to do that with ours." She thought for a moment. "Can you call someone? I mean, with your mind?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps only Erne, and I don't know if I can disturb her."

"Can you try?" Arvi asked.

Senthi made an image of Erne in her mind and was surprised that the image was doing something she could never have come up with herself: whitewashing the tool shed in the yard. It must be true. She called to it. **We're stranded in town with robes that carry sickness. Can you send someone?**

The image of Erne stopped painting and looked surprised. **Senthi?**

**And Arvi. We need our grey robes at the bath-house in Mill Street.**

Presently, Rusla came along with the grey robes in a bag. "Don't touch us!" Arvi said. "Put it down there."
"Erne said you were here," Rusla said, "How did she know?"

"I called her," Senthi said.

"With your gift? I didn't know you could do that."

"No, I didn't know either. Arvi thought of it."

They sent Rusla back to the Temple for the herbs before changing. It was no use having to boil another set of robes.

Finally they got it all sorted out. As they were boiling a kettle in the wash-house, Senthi noticed that Arvi was watching her. "Anything wrong with me?" she asked.

"No-- I was trying to see if I could see it. If gifted people look different."

Senthi thought about that for a bit. "They look different to me, I think. But perhaps you have to be gifted yourself to notice that."

"Hmm." Arvi poked savagely at the robes with the washing stick, a determined expression on her face. "I'll work it out."

The ritual lesson did not go well. Erne was distracted and the novices fidgeted. Erne stopped early and said, "I have something to announce."

Cold gripped Senthi by the shoulders. It could only be something bad or she'd have announced it right at the beginning.

"The High Priestess in Lenay is dying. She was my old teacher. She has written to ask me to come and succeed her."

There was a stunned silence. How could a High Priestess of Naigha ever die? And what were they to do without Erne? Arvi was the first to speak up. "Who is going to teach us then?"

"Ranaisse will take over for now, and it's only one moon to the Feast. You'd have been out of my care anyway."

Only one moon to the Feast of Naigha. It had been almost a year. Senthi shivered. On the Feast, she would no longer be a novice. She would be a priestess. The snake heads on her hands stared accusingly at
her. You are already a priestess, they seemed to say. You have been marked.

"Excuse me," Rava said, "about the Feast-- I know what priestesses of Naigha do on Midwinter, but how do we do it? I mean, how do we know where to go, or do we just go anywhere?"

Erne laughed. "If there's holly on the front door, the back door is open."

They could almost hear the sound of Rava's jaw dropping. "So that's what the holly is for."

Senthi had wondered about that too. When she'd first come to the city it had been the day before Midwinter and some houses had had holly on or around the door. She'd thought it was just the way people in Valdis decorated their houses at Midwinter.

"Some of us go to the same place every year," Erne continued, "and those don't put holly out, but if there's holly on a house you're invited. You should watch out whether there's already one of us inside, though. Most houses don't have more than one available man." Someone giggled. "And if your man tries to take advantage of you, you don't have to go along with it. All that's needed is to sleep with one man for the one night. If they want something --interesting-- they should go to the whorehouse." She suddenly sounded fierce, as if she was talking from experience. "If you're having your courses, or if you've never had your courses yet, you're excused."

Senthi blushed; she knew, and all the others knew, that she was the only one who hadn't had her courses yet. Even Maile had been into the rags-and-sponges cupboard.

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Something drew Senthi to the temple. There wasn't usually anybody in there at this time of day, only the fire-pot burning by itself in front of the statue. Occasionally someone would come in and tend the fire or sweep the floor. She had had those duties herself a few times.
This time the temple wasn't empty. Someone was kneeling --no, crouching-- in the middle of the floor, breathing laboriously. Coming closer, she saw that it was Airyn. No, she knew now that she'd known all the time that it was Airyn. Only, Airyn doubled over on the floor was so far from her expectations that she'd pushed that to the back of her mind immediately.

*Child,* the well-known voice in her head said. *Come here. Touch me.*

Senthi dropped to her knees at the old woman's side and took her hand. "Are you all right? Can I help you?"

*Call them. Naigha wants me.*

Senthi stood up and started to make for the door, but Airyn called her back. *Don't leave me.*

There was no other sound in the temple than the High Priestess's laboured breathing, no other light, with the door closed, than what came from the fire-pot. In the reddish glow, the statue of Naigha seemed to take on a life of its own, as if the goddess was about to step off her pedestal. It made Senthi shiver with more than cold.

*Call them!* There was so much urgency in it that Senthi couldn't help herself: she called out with her mind as strongly as she could, not thinking who would hear her.

People were beginning to rustle into the temple, surrounding them. Senthi felt a hand on her arm, but she wouldn't let go of Airyn, who was still speaking to her. *I need your strength.* "She needs me," Senthi said aloud. There was no perceptible difference between herself and Airyn now. They were breathing with one breath, sharing one mind, their hearts beating in unison. She stood up and helped the old woman to stand. The other priestesses stepped back, giving them room.

Airyn raised her arms, sleeves falling back to reveal the markings that went all the way up to her shoulders, perhaps even further under the folds. She started singing something that Senthi had only ever heard in rehearsal, the Midwinter chant, calling on Naigha as the depth of life, the source of merciful death. Some of the older priestesses hesitantly joined in.
Airyn's voice grew stronger. Senthi felt herself being drained, gave in to it, gave every bit of her young strength to keep the old High Priestess standing and singing.

And Naigha came. Invisibly at first, then as a swirl of midnight blue that enveloped both of them in an ice-cold embrace. Senthi couldn't hold on any longer. She had to break loose from Airyn, become only herself again, or Naigha would take her away as well.

She felt Airyn crumple beside her, the swish of the mantle missing her by a hair. Someone put an arm around her, a very old priestess she couldn't remember having seen before, one of those who had sung. "Come, child," she said.

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Somehow she ended up in her own bed with a cup of something hot in her hands. It smelt of herbs. By force of habit Senthi tried to determine what was in it. "Vervain and lavender," the old priestess said, "nothing that's bad for you." Senthi gratefully drank it and felt its warmth spread through her body. She was exhausted, literally drained, but there was something she wanted to know before she gave in.

"What happened?" she asked.

The old priestess took the empty cup and put it on the floor. "Naigha came for the High Priestess."

"I noticed that. What happened to me? It was as if she-- she took me and used me as herself, or something like that."

"Airyn and you were much alike," the old priestess said. "You are very strong. She could draw on your strength to sing the chant to call Naigha."

"Wouldn't Naigha have come for her anyway?"

"Perhaps not at once. It could have taken a long time." The old priestess covered her with the blanket, touching her forehead the way Airyn had done after the marking. Senthi didn't have the strength to try and stay awake.
Senthi woke to the sound of singing, many voices sometimes in unison, sometimes in parts. The funeral. When she jumped out of bed -- ouch, her head-- she found that she was still wearing her grey robe, threw it off and struggled into the black one that was across the end of her bed. It wasn't hers: it was too long and she had to draw it up over the belt to be able to walk. Jerna or Arvi must be wearing one that was much too short.

She reached the temple just in time, when the novices were going forward to render their honours. It was indeed Arvi who had put on Senthi's robe, because she showed a stretch of ankle under the hem.

Airyn's body lay on a bier in the middle of the temple, almost on the spot where she had fallen. Rusla was moving around it, anointing the hands and feet with something from a bowl in her hand. She gave the bowl to Maile, who did the same. By the time Senthi got the bowl she had learned the movements, but not the words the others had said under their breath.

Instead, she thought to Airyn's spirit, wherever it might be, Go as you've lived. It seemed to be the right thing to say.

The eldest priestesses wrapped Airyn's body in a white sheet. It looked strange with the braid cut off, as if to make it even more clear that Airyn herself wasn't using the body any more. It must have been done when Senthi was still asleep or getting dressed. She should know from the ritual lessons at which point in the service it was done, but she didn't remember.

They carried the bier outside, all the way out of town to the vaults. People started to follow them. Senthi strained to see who was actually leading the procession, but couldn't tell: for one thing, she was right at the back. It must be one of the older priestesses, perhaps the one who had put her to bed.

There was barely enough room in the vault for all the priestesses, let alone the people who had come in with them, Airyn's blood relatives. Maile's blood relatives too, Senthi realised. There were more of them than she'd expected. Maile's mother was there with a girl who looked a
lot like Maile, both of them smelling strongly of lavender soap and faintly of fish. The air in the vault got very close. It didn't help that a High Priestess's funeral required more incense than usual.

Maile's mother was crying. Maile looked close to crying herself, but of course a priestess of Naigha didn't cry over the dead. Senthi felt the heaviness of grief as much as the closeness of the air, stifling everything alive. She tried to reach out of the vault with her mind, but there was something over it, covering it like a blanket. *I should look at that when it isn't so crowded.* She hadn't noticed this particular thing before, but then she'd been too busy to notice anything at the funerals she'd attended: usually there was only one senior priestess and one novice to sing all the chants and perform all the rites. It must be hard for a village priestess to do everything alone.

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Maile was dressing in her temple robe, preparing to go out. It was the only time in the year that they wore their temple robes outside the temple itself. Senthi sat on the foot of Maile's bed, fuming silently. She was the only one of their group who couldn't go. She was half relieved and half angry, as if it made her somehow fall short. She didn't know whether it meant that she would be a novice for another year, and the others wouldn't know that either. She didn't dare ask any of the older priestesses, even if it was bound to have happened to some of them too.

But this was Maile's moment of glory. "Hey, you look great," Senthi said. Maile did indeed look great: there was something about the temple robe, or about the way she wore it, that made her look much older than twelve and a half, and Senthi noticed for the first time that Maile was beautiful.

"Really?"

"Would I say it if you didn't? Come on, you know me better than that."

Maile hesitated for a moment. "What's up?" Senthi asked.

"Well..." Senthi waited patiently while Maile fidgeted, knowing that she wouldn't say anything until she was ready. "They've been saying things."
"Who are 'they', and what have they been saying?"

"Well, it's Jerna mostly."

"You know you shouldn't believe what Jerna says. But what has she been saying then?"

"That you... that they're grooming you for High Priestess."

"What?"

"Well, that's what she said. I didn't want to believe her, but it sounded plausible, that's all. You are gifted, and all the High Priestesses are. Airyn, and Erne, and I'm sure that Naigha will choose Ranaise next."

"At least you don't think that she will choose me. Great gods, I'm only just twelve, and if the things Airyn could do are anything to go by I won't even be close until I'm forty at least."

Maile shrugged. "She heard people talking about you. They said they'd have to start early. And you're good at everything."

"That's not true. You know that you've been helping me cram my herbs. I'd never have managed otherwise. I'm just learning like everybody."

"Yeah? And why aren't you going out like everybody? You're really getting special treatment, aren't you?" Maile was almost in tears now, rubbing her eyes with the black left sleeve of her robe.

"I'm not a woman yet. You know that."

Senthi tried to put an arm around Maile, to comfort her: she was clearly nervous. Maile pulled away from her. "Don't touch me!"

Anger flared up in Senthi, and longing, and something she couldn't name, and she reached out to Maile with her mind, unleashed power hitting the other girl full in the face. Maile fell backwards, her arms flailing out, and hit the bed with a sickening crash.

Great Naigha, I've killed her! She picked up her cloak and fled.
Chapter 3

It was easy to leave the temple. Everybody was leaving the temple, after all. Senthi wrapped herself in her cloak so nobody could see that she was wearing the grey robe under it instead of the black-and-white one. She made another cloak of her essence, the way Erne had taught her.

Without thinking, she made her way through the dark streets of Valdis. She noticed the doors adorned with holly. She shouldn't go too close to those, to avoid running into any priestesses on legitimate business. After turning more corners than she could remember she found herself in a familiar place: opposite the house where she'd gone for her first funeral, where she'd taken care of the feverish boy. Of course, her feet had brought her here, she'd been walking these same streets every day for weeks until he didn't need any more nursing.

She huddled in the shadows, looking at the house. There was a light in an upstairs room. She thought she could climb the creeper; it would probably bear her weight. The boy was behind that window, she suddenly knew, awake. His father and older brother were sleeping on the other side of the house. Sleeping? There were more people there: Cynla and one of last year's novices. Of course, it was Midwinter's Night, a widower with a grown son, the back door would be open. No need to climb in her robes.

She crept into the house, up the stairs, to the boy's room. He startled, but she put a finger to her lips and whispered. "Remember me?"
He nodded. "You're the little priestess."

Senthi bristled at 'little', but she declined to protest. He was really very young, barely older than she was herself. "Listen, I need help. I'm running away."

"Where to?"

"Anywhere. Can't do it in these clothes, though. Can you lend me something? I don't mind if it's boys' things."

He rummaged in a chest and came up with a pair of hose and a shirt. "I grew out of these. They might fit you."

She pulled the robe over her head and struggled into the clothes. The hose were exactly right, the shirt was a bit too large and had long sleeves that covered the markings on her hands. "Perfect. Do you have a pair of scissors? A knife?"

"Only a pocket-knife. We have shears in the kitchen."

"Oh, never mind." She took her own ceremonial dagger and hacked off her braid while the boy watched, aghast. She thrust the silver-blond hank into his hands. "Here. Burn it. Or keep it if you're sentimental. Just don't let anyone see it."

The boy sat looking at the braid, biting his lip. "Do you have any money? Food?" he asked at last.

Senthi hadn't had time to think of that. "No."

"If you go to the kitchen you can grab some bread. Wait, stay here, I'll go, if Father or Eldan comes down I can always say I couldn't sleep and got hungry." She could hear him clatter down the stairs, and after a while back up. He was carrying a bulging sack. "Bread, cheese, sausage, apples. Wait, one moment." He felt under his mattress, came up with a purse, put something from the purse in the sack. "Just in case you run out."

"But I... I mean you don't have to..."

He interrupted her: "I like you. You were nice when I was ill. I dreamed about you a lot."
She was tempted to ask him to come with her, but she knew with absolute certainty that this was something she had to do alone. She had one thing to offer him. "My name is Senthi."

"I'm Rovan. You know that, of course, but--" She could see him think. "If you're ever here again, will you come and see me?"

"If I can."

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Senthi had only been outside the Temple by day. At night, Valdis seemed very different. She had a hard time finding her way, especially as she was constantly on guard and not paying much attention to where she was going.

Eventually she came to a place she recognised: the wharf where they'd disembarked when she first came to Valdis. Another boat was moored there now, thank the gods; she couldn't have faced Uncle Arin and Aunt Moyri. It seemed to be deserted. She climbed aboard and hid under a tarpaulin that covered what felt like furs. It was almost comfortable. After a while she slept.

Voices woke her up. "I found her! She's mine!" And a voice that clearly had a cold, "No, let's see if she belongs somewhere, she might be worth money."

Senthi sat up, shedding the tarpaulin and the furs she'd wrapped herself in while sleeping, and looked into the faces of the people arguing about her. A large solidly built man and a tall sinewy woman who reminded her of Jerna in her subtle slyness.

She also noticed, only now, that the boat was moving. They'd left the city already. There were fields on both sides, rolling hills, and she could just see the wall and the gates when she looked back.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Is that for you to ask?" the woman said. "You hid yourself in our boat. You can choose whether to work or to pay passage. Or we could throw you to the fishes."
"I can work." Rovan had put money in the sack, but she didn't know how much and if it would be enough for passage to wherever this boat was going. South, it seemed. They were going downstream and she remembered seeing that same gate a year ago.

"Hmm. You don't look very strong."

The man had her by the wrists now, looking at her hands. "Hey, look here, it's a runaway priestess."

"Good. Worth more, probably. Would the Temple pay to have you back?"

Senthi tried to answer, but it came out in a croak. "Don't think so."

"Let's take her down to Essle," the man said. "Sell her to Red Aule."

"All the way? Might as well pull her weight, then. Can you cook, girl?"

"Yes," Senthi said. "And do some doctoring." She was finding her voice. "In case you need something for that cold."

The woman cleared her throat self-consciously. "We'll keep you for a bit."

The man started to put the furs straight and found Senthi's sack. "Look here, she's got some assets." He took out half a loaf of bread, several apples, a hard sausage, something in a cloth that had to be the cheese, and finally a couple of small, flat and shiny objects.

"Well, she's a rich girl, this little priestess we've caught. Who'd have thought she had two whole riders?" He pocketed them with a satisfied grin.

Senthi blushed. Rovan had given her two riders and she'd lost them within a day. The man made a grab for the dagger at Senthi's belt as well, but she put a hand on it. "Don't. That's holy. Naigha will curse you if you touch it." He turned away, grumbling.

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They fell into an uneasy companionship. The boat people --Lan and Lysna, brother and sister-- left Senthi well alone as long as she did the cooking
and looked after the horse. It was an ancient grey gelding that thoroughly detested Lan and was wary of Lysna (rather like Senthi's opinion, though Senthi detested Lysna as well) but it didn't mind Senthi, especially as she took care never to approach it without a carrot or a piece of turnip in her hand.

From what she overheard, Senthi could make out that Lan and Lysna were not exactly thieves, but not exactly on the right side of the law either: they dealt in contraband, stolen goods, small shipments of things that couldn't really bear being exposed to daylight. They didn't bother to hide it from her, probably because they were planning to sell her to this Red Aule anyway. She decided to get away as soon as they reached a convenient place to do it.

The journey downstream seemed faster than it had been upstream, but Senthi couldn't determine if it really was faster or it was just that she'd seen it before. Much sooner than she expected they were between the high banks that meant Lenyas. A few days later they reached the bridge built up with inns and eating-houses that was the distinguishing feature of Lenay.

They moored at the wharf right under the bridge. It was not the best place because of the fish-bones and scraps that people threw into the river from the inns, but one of the cheapest and close to the stairs up to town. They climbed the stairs several times with heavy bundles and chests. Lysna said they couldn't afford to use the crane. Senthi knew that Rovan's two riders could pay for crane hire forty times over: she'd heard Aunt Moyri grumble about the price going up from tenpence to a shilling.

Lenay seemed the perfect place to run away, until Senthi realised that many people here would know her uncle and aunt and she'd have to keep hidden every time there was the merest chance that their boat would be in. Also, she didn't know how to keep herself. She could try to get work as an apothecary's assistant, a kitchen maid, or even, if she could find a master who would waive the fee, a thatcher's apprentice like at home, but Lenay was as strange a place as Valdis had been and she didn't know anyone here who could help her.
Not that it would be any easier in Essle. She didn't know anyone there either. At least Essle was so much larger than Lenay that not all the people knew each other and she wouldn't stand out as a stranger so much. Also, it would probably be easier to find work: there was simply more work to do in a larger town.

She stayed. Lysna and Lan didn't let her out of their sight anyway. They didn't even let her go to the market alone to shop for food. Lan was at her side like a shadow, a hulking bodyguard.

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The weather got better the further south they came. When the boat reached the Hundred Rivers, it felt like spring. Senthi hadn't counted the days, but she could tell from the reed fields and the dusting of green on the willows that it really was almost spring here. It made her homesick. She was closer to home than she'd been for over a year, but she couldn't go back.

They ran out of tow-path. Lan rode the horse on the main road while Lysna and Senthi poled the boat through the narrow channels. "I won't leave you alone with him," Lysna said, and Senthi appreciated that, though she knew it wasn't kindness that made Lysna so considerate.

The castle of Tilis was suddenly upon them, looming over the boat like a monster. It had always been a harmless and even friendly monster, but this time it looked menacing. Senthi hadn't realised they were so close. They must have gone much faster than it had seemed, cloaked by the morning mist.

Lysna moored the boat at the same landing where Senthi had boarded on the way to Valdis with her aunt and uncle. "I hope you understand that you shouldn't try to escape here," she said. "Stay out of sight of everyone, especially people who might recognise you."

"I wanted to stay out of sight anyway," she said. She sat in the boat, making herself as invisible as she could, while Lysna went to meet Lan and find stabling for the horse until they came back from Essle. It was
very tempting to go and see if she could at least take a peek at people, but she didn't dare risk it.
Chapter 4

In all the years that she'd lived in Tilis, Senthi had never once been to Essle, though it was closer than almost anything else. Essle crept on her insidiously at first: only a few rough cabins and shacks at the riverside. As they poled on the shacks became thicker on the ground, growing into a town that seemed to have been built of pieces of crates, torn sailcloth and other rubbish. They kept to the middle of the river as much as they could.

"It's not safe here," Lysna said. "We have to get through this part before sunset."

By sunset they were among what looked like real houses. Many were built on stilts above the water, like the castle and most of the houses in Tilis. They put up at a small inn. Lysna insisted on that, though Lan wanted to go on. "If we go on now Aule will be too busy to see us. Better to go in the morning."

As it turned out they didn't go until the afternoon. Lan and Lysna wanted to take the boat to the harbour and unload it first, because Red Aule appeared to live somewhere where cargo wasn't safe. Eventually, the boat was empty and they made their way to a part of town that looked almost as bad as the shack town in the north. They stopped rather than mooring: next to a bit of sand lapped by filthy water.

Lan took her by the arm roughly and dragged her ashore. "Don't bruise her!" Lysna snapped at him, but he didn't seem to listen. They went over a precarious wooden bridge to a house that looked as if it had been built
right in the water. If it stood on an island at all, the island was the size of
the house itself.

A woman was standing in the doorway. She wasn't any taller than
Senthì and perhaps thinner, but she looked much larger because of her
great cloud of red hair. Judging by her pale skin and freckles it had once
been naturally red, but the greyish-white roots suggested that she used
some kind of dye now. This must be Red Aule.

When she spoke, Senthì could barely understand her. She'd had a hard
time in Valdis at first because the people there talked very differently
from what she'd been hearing all her life, but at least they'd talked
clearly. This woman seemed to draw out the words interminably as well
as not pronouncing half of the sounds. And the sounds she did pronounce
were subtly different. She tried to listen hard while Lan held her by the
arm --still very painfully-- and suddenly, in the middle of a sentence, it fell
into place.

"... for the Mighty Servant. I'll have to see if she really is, though. Four,
you said?"

"Ten," said Lysna. "You heard me the first time."

"Six," said Red Aule, taking some silver from a purse at her waist and
rattling it. Lan looked longingly at it, like a cat waiting to pounce on a
mouse.

They decided on seven. Aule counted silver riders into Lysna's hand
--one, two, three, four-- and took Senthì's other arm. "Come, girl."

"Hey! You said seven!"

"Only if she really is untouched. I'll have to see for myself."

There was no chance to run away now. Even if she managed to escape
from Aule's grip, which felt even more powerful than Lan's, she couldn't
go anywhere without having them catch her the next moment. She let
Aule take her into the house.

She could sense minds through the walls of the small room Aule
brought her to. She didn't see anyone except Aule, but there were several
more people in the house. There was no time to look further, because
Aule undressed her with more care than she expected and laid her on a
table. Then she ran her hands over Senthi's naked body, dispassionately, like a doctor, and parted her legs with one hand.

"Hmm, I didn't expect that much honesty from Lysna. We'll have to do something about the priestess marks, though." She threw Senthi a short linen shift --she'd kicked the clothes into a corner-- and took a pot from a shelf. It contained some kind of flesh-coloured paste that she rubbed over Senthi's hands and wrists, hiding the snake heads. It looked strangely bare.

Aule left Senthi in the room while she went back to pay Lysna the other three riders. There was a window, but it was too small to get through and shuttered at that. There was nothing she could use as a weapon, except possibly some of the substances in the jars on the shelf. No time to find out.

"So, girl," Aule said when she came back. "You're mine now. All bought and paid for." She took Senthi up a flight of rickety stairs to another little room, bare except for a bed and a sconce on the wall without a candle in it. "Stay here until you're called. If you split I'll find you. Don't try to set the place on fire, it's protected." She locked the door behind her when she left.

This room had a rather larger window, also with a shutter. It was open, flapping dejectedly in the slight breeze. Senthi rattled it until it came off in her hands. She threw it out. It fell into the mud below with a juicy splot. She could see it floating away sluggishly. *I could get through this,* she thought. *Better wait until dark.*

She sat on the bed, shivering, and practised Erne's lessons. It was hard to find her place: the house wasn't built on solid ground. There were protections around it as well. The one on the room didn't impede her; that must be Aule's fire protection. There was a stronger one on the whole house that made it almost impossible to perceive anything outside with her mind. She had got so used to the world being large and accessible that this small contained world was stifling.

She turned her attention to the people in the house. There were at least half a dozen beyond the wall, all women. Most were frightened. Some might be gifted, but none could hear her when she thought to them
directly. But then she'd never been able to do that with someone she
didn't know yet.

It became darker. She was hungry, and very thirsty, and colder every
moment. When it was almost dark enough to make an attempt on the
window, she heard voices on the stairs. One was a man's voice.

Aule came into the room and put a candle in the sconce, then let the
owner of the voice in. It was a huge man, richly dressed. He wore a
bulging purse on his belt as well as a small silver-handled dagger.
Senthì's dagger. She stared at it, shocked. "How did you get that?"

"Bought it from Aule, my dear, the way I bought you." His voice was
cultured, with a very slight drawl. He took her by the wrist and stroked
her hair with his other hand. "To do with as I like." He lifted her shift.
"Young, are you? Twelve at most. I like them young. Aule can always get
me what I want." He let go of her wrist to pull the shift off her, but she
couldn't move: her body didn't seem to obey. She was forced to watch
helplessly as he ran his hands over her ribs, her shoulder, her as yet non-
existent breasts, her midriff and belly. He smelled of rampant maleness
overlaid with some cloyingly sweet flower scent. Part of her brain,
detached, remembered what Cynla had taught her: lavender, elderflower,
something she didn't recognise but probably from the south.

Suddenly, he stopped and grabbed her wrist again, holding her right
hand in both his big hands and rubbing excitedly at it. "Aule should have
told me that! A little priestess, eh? You can't have been in the temple
long." He started to unlace his hose. Senthì backed away as fast as her
half-paralysed state would allow. She'd seen a male member before, of
course, her father's, and Rovan's when he was ill, and those of the boys
she used to go swimming with, but those had all been little dangly things.
She'd never seen one in this state. It stuck out at her threateningly, like a
weapon.

He lifted her by the waist and dropped her on the bed. It was hard and
straws from the mattress stung her in the back. He bent over her, ready
to use his weapon. She felt the power of her mind surge, a weapon of her
own.

She struck.
His face took on an expression of utter surprise. He toppled forward. Senthi could just scramble out from under him before he fell on the bed with a crash, making the wooden frame crack and collapse. Everything seemed to go very slowly. Senthi picked up her shift and put it on. She took the dagger out of its sheath and cut the thong that the sheath hung from --*Naigha, forgive me!*-- but the purse was under the man's body and he was too heavy for her to move. Anyway, she wanted to touch him as little as possible. She tore a strip off her shift to tie the dagger to her arm.

The window was large enough to squeeze through, but only just. Senthi felt her shift rip as she pulled herself up on the casement. She hung there for one dizzying moment, then let herself drop into the mud. *Splat.* She didn't fall hard. It was thick, it stank, it chilled her to the bone, but it was outside the house. She'd escaped.

She didn't have time to pull herself together: she was sinking. The room she'd left was at the back of the house, too far from the bridge. There was another bridge about ten yards away, barely visible in the gloom. She tried to swim, nearly went under, and found the bottom almost convincingly solid. The mud was only four feet deep, resting on firmer mud.

She remembered to protect herself, thinking of Aule's words: *If you split I'll find you.* Aule hadn't looked gifted, but she seemed likely to employ people who were. Senthi reached the bridge, pulled herself onto it and lay there panting for a moment, then crawled to the shelter of the house the bridge led to. She pulled up her legs and made herself as small as possible, waiting and watching. The mud started to cake on her legs and the tatters of the shift stuck to her skin. Nobody came out of Aule's house or went into it, at least not as far as she could see from this side.

Slowly, her eyes got used to the dark. A scrawny cat came by, carrying a rat nearly as big as itself. It made its way over bridges and walkways. Just before it was out of sight Senthi got up, cracking the mud that had set to a hard crust, and followed it almost as quietly. The cat disappeared between two boards in a tumbledown wooden structure --a house or a shed, that wasn't clear in the dark-- but it had taken her far enough to see.
a real street, with light shining from some of the houses and lanterns hanging out. Thank you, cat.

Now that she wasn't watching one thing intently any more, it struck her that Essle was full of people. A great many people, all thinking aloud, it seemed. The markings on her hands stung as if they'd just been made. All her senses were wide open. She was acutely aware of the cold, of the mud on her skin, the lights in the street ahead of her, voices, thoughts, currents of passion, the stink of the water under the bridge and the smell of frying fish and onions, which made her hungry and queasy at the same time.

It wasn't only the people: there was a presence paying attention to her that didn't fit into the pattern. It was too great to fit. Naigha? No, it was fiercer than that. It called her by name: Senthi. Not now, she thought at it impatiently, too busy with getting away.

There was someone behind her-- not Aule, a man, coming closer. Gifted, though he was protecting himself as carefully as Senthi was. She ducked out of the way just before he jumped to catch her. He lost his balance and fell into the water with a satisfying splash. Had it been someone sent by Aule, or just a crook? She kept to the shadows after that, sidling from one bit of barely adequate shelter to another.

Essle seemed to consist completely of bridges and little islands, wooden platforms and boats. Senthi didn't try to remember any of it: she was only getting far away from Aule's house, keeping out of sight as much as possible. When the sky was getting lighter, she came to a bit of town that looked more civilised, less chaotic. It was still all islands, but every island had only one house and some room for a yard around it.

A woman came out of the back door of a house just as Senthi crossed the bridge to it. "We don't want any beggars here!" she shouted and threw the contents of her bucket over Senthi. It was dishwater, and it made her slightly cleaner but even more cold and wet than she was already. She was too tired to run or hide now. She sat down on the far end of the bridge, out of reach of any more buckets of dirty water or worse. It was all she could do to retreat into herself, get out of the press of countless minds.
There was one mind that shone like a beacon and her makeshift protection couldn't keep it out. It was very close. It couldn't be the presence she had felt earlier; it had something in common with it, but it wasn't so large by far. She tried to call to it, but her strength was not enough. *I am here,* she thought, the way she had done the first time she'd learned to find her inner place, hoping whoever it was would hear her. Everything else faded into insignificance.
Chapter 5

She was being carried. Someone large and comfortable was carrying her. She opened her eyes and saw nothing, because there was a sleeve hanging over her face. This was not the person with the blazing mind, she could tell that much. The person with the blazing mind was in the house she was being carried into. She was set down on her feet. Her knees buckled, but she found a seat behind her and sank down on it.

She was in a large warm kitchen. There was a woman sitting at the kitchen table. At first she thought it was Red Aule, because the woman also had red hair and was thin and no longer young. The red was real, though, shot through with silver. She was the one with the blazing mind.

"I've brought her, mistress," said the comfortable person. Now that Senthi could see her, she turned out to be a tall youngish woman with skin like polished bronze and dark hair as curly as a lamb's fleece. She didn't look gifted, but there was something about her that Senthi couldn't put a name to just now.

"Well, clean her up and see that she eats and sleeps. And get her some decent clothes. I'll start on her training tomorrow." The redhead swept out of the kitchen, leaving Senthi alone with the brown woman.

"I'm Ruzyn," the woman said. She put a blanket around Senthi, who couldn't stop shivering, and gave her a cup of herb tea. There was a large kettle just starting to boil over the fire. Ruzyn poured the water into a tub
that was already half full. "It's not very warm, but it'll probably warm you up anyway. I'll put the kettle on again."

Senthi stripped the sodden tatters off and started to get into the water. "Your knife?" Ruzyn asked. Senthi had completely forgotten the dagger. She let Ruzyn untie the strip of cloth, but handled the sheathed dagger herself, laying it on the table. "Nobody should touch it except me." Ruzyn nodded and left it alone.

The water was indeed lukewarm, but at least it was clean and the tub was large enough to float in. She'd almost fallen asleep when Ruzyn poured another kettle of nearly boiling water in, making the water blessedly warm, and washed her from head to toe with a soft cloth.

"You should come out now, that water is filthy. I've got some hot food for you." Ruzyn wrapped Senthi in a towel and dried her as if she was a child. She got clean clothes, only a little too large, that probably belonged to one of the maids she'd seen going in and out. There was thick soup and fresh bread. She was beginning to feel human again, no longer a wild hunted thing.

"I'll make a bed for you in the loft," Ruzyn said. "The mistress will probably want you to have a room of your own, but I can't very well do that without her ordering it." She climbed up a ladder Senthi hadn't noticed before that led to a half-loft above one side of the kitchen. "Can you come up by yourself? I don't think we can carry you up the ladder."

Senthi hauled herself up and collapsed as soon as she was at the top. She didn't even notice Ruzyn putting her to bed, but it must have happened. The next thing she knew she was on a straw mattress under two woollen blankets, wearing a clean whole shift, while people bustled about beneath her. She was ravenously hungry and her head hurt like anything. Looking down from the loft, she saw her dagger still lying where she had left it, now surrounded by bowls and plates. Her borrowed skirt and tunic lay at the foot of the bed, neatly folded.

Dressing and climbing down the ladder was harder than it looked: her head didn't only hurt, but it also swam. She made it to the seat at the table. Someone gave her a plate of beans and salt pork, but nobody talked to her until Ruzyn came and sat beside her. "The mistress told them not
to talk to you," she said. "It's nothing personal. She wants you to be--well--she doesn't want people to tell you things before she tells you things herself."

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"Ruzyn."

"Yes, mistress."

"Take the girl to my room." The mistress spoke as if Senthi wasn't there, though she was sitting at the table right under her nose, shelling peas. As soon as her head had stopped swimming—not hurting, though—she'd begged Ruzyn to give her something to do. Ruzyn seemed to be some kind of housekeeper, who left the actual housework to the maids and manservants Senthi hadn't managed to count yet. She went about carrying letters, arranging things, giving orders in her soft almost apologetic voice. Most of the time it sounded as if she was only relaying the mistress's orders.

This time she carried out the mistress's orders herself: as soon as the red-haired woman had left she straightened Senthi's clothes, ran a comb through her hair though Senthi protested that she could do it herself, and took her to a large square room. It was on a corner of the house, with windows on two sides. The red-haired woman was sitting behind a desk. She motioned for Senthi to sit down opposite her and sent Ruzyn out of the room. Senthi could feel protection coming down around her, all along the walls. She took a deep breath.

"Feel that, don't you? Can you do it?"

"Not as well as that," Senthi said, and as an afterthought, "mistress."

"You'll learn. If you can. Let me look at you." She looked, hard. The power of it crept under Senthi's skin and made her want to protect herself, but she found that she couldn't. She was frozen again, though not with fear: it was half awe, half knowing that part of it was her own power that she didn't know how to use yet. After what seemed to be an interminable time, the mistress let her go. She sat trembling, reduced to jelly.
"Yes, you'll do. Why were you running around town alone in that state?"

"I escaped from Red Aule's house. I killed the Mighty Servant."

"You killed the Mighty Servant? How? Don't bother to tell me why, I've known Mernath since before you were born. Aule probably intended to serve you to him as a delicacy. Are you sure it was the Mighty Servant?"

Senthi nodded. "Red Aule said so. He was huge. I was so scared. Smelt of elderflower and lavender. I nearly cut his purse too, but he was on top of it and I couldn't lift him."

The red-haired woman hid her face in her hands and started to shake. It took a while for Senthi to realise that she was laughing. "Cut his purse! That would have been a howl. Elderflower and lavender, yes, sounds like Mernath all right. Well, how did you kill him?"

"I hit him with my mind. I was so scared and angry that I could do it. The way I killed Maile." She hadn't wanted to say that, but it had come out without thinking.

"You didn't only kill the Mighty Servant, you also killed this Maile. Two deaths to your name at, what, twelve? Impressive. Now if you'd been born and bred here in Essle I'd understand, but you're from somewhere up north, aren't you?"

"Not all that far north. Tilis. I've been living in Valdis this past year."

"In the Temple of Naigha, it seems. Hmm, you've had both hands done, at least there's some knowledge there. Who is High Priestess in Valdis these days, still Airyn?"

"Not any more," Senthi said, startled. "She died. It's Ranaise now, I think."

"Never heard of her. We'll have to do something about those marks, of course." Senthi expected the woman to use paste like Red Aule, but instead she took Senthi's hands in her own and glared at them. The markings went away. It didn't hurt or even itch, but there was some feeling, the opposite of touch. It made her shrink back. "I'll teach you to do that for yourself soon. And how to kill people properly. What you did to
Mernath, and probably to that Maile too, only knocked them out for a while."

_I didn't kill Maile._ If the earth had opened beneath Senthi, she couldn't have had a worse sinking feeling. _I didn't kill her. I could have stayed._ But she hadn't stayed, and there was no going back now: one only goes into the Temple of Naigha once.

"You're my apprentice from now on," the red-haired woman said, startling Senthi back to alertness, "apprenticed in the Guild of Archan." _What?_ "My name is Arnei Venla astin Rhydin. You shall call me 'mistress' as Ruzyn does."

"But I can't pay the apprentice fee," Senthi protested, "mistress."

"Oh, you'll earn your keep, we'll make you work. If you have any questions, ask them of Ruzyn."

The interview was clearly over. Senthi tried to leave the room and found the protection still in place. "Mistress?"

"Yes."

"Could you let me out, please?"

"Let yourself out. First lesson." She bent over some papers, seeming unconcerned.

Senthi sat back on her haunches and examined the door. The whole room was sealed with a continuous sheet of protection, like a coat of paint, but there was the slightest crack where the door met the frame. _If I had a knife I could force it in._ She tried to remember whether Erne had ever talked about breaking protection. Only of making it and lifting your own, it seemed. _Well, I could imagine I've made this and lift it._ It wasn't what Senthi would have used herself. Much smoother, for one; comparing it to a coat of paint was actually useful.

A _sponge._ There was one in her imagined hand, dripping with imagined soapy water. It was disconcerting as always to see that it didn't really make her wet. _Good thing it's fresh paint._ She rubbed at the door experimentally. Some of the paint came off. _Good. Try the edges first._ By the time she'd sponged all around the edge of the door she was indeed wet, with sweat. But the door opened.
"Very good." Senthi started; she'd forgotten Venla completely. "Next
time you might clean up after yourself." All traces that remained of the
protection, and of Senthi's efforts to lift it, disappeared in one moment.

She did get a room of her own after that, a little cubicle under the roof
next to Ruzyn's. It was the first room Senthi had ever had to herself.
"Mind you protect it," Ruzyn told her as they were cleaning and airing it.
"Every night before you go to sleep and whenever you're in here alone."

"Isn't this house safe?"

"No place is completely safe. If you can do the protection, it's best to
get into the habit."

They sat down on the fresh straw mattress they'd filled and shaken up.
Senthi looked at the backs of her hands, which still didn't show the
Temple markings. "Do I have to do my hands every day? And how?"

"The mistress will teach you. I don't know. I can see the marks if I look
hard enough. So can you, I think." With some effort, Senthi could see the
markings showing through something that looked very much like the
paint-like protection on Venla's room. "How come you can see them?
You're not gifted at all, are you? Sorry, but Ven- the mistress told me to
ask you if I had any questions."

"I have part of the gift. I can see things, but I can't actually do
anything, or learn to do things the way you can."

"Did you see me when I was running away from Red Aule, or did she?"

"I did. The mistress told me to look around to find you, because she's
so strong that people notice her looking if she does it. You're probably
going to be that strong yourself." Ruzyn's face became a shade darker; it
might have been a blush.

That didn't surprise Senthi much: she'd been told much the same thing
in the Temple. It was a more unsettling thought that Venla couldn't even
look around without being noticed. "If she's so strong, isn't she strong
enough to hide herself when she looks?"
"Not where people know her so well."

Senthi thought for a moment. "And they don't know you?"

"They think I'm not gifted at all, like you did. Nobody expects me to look at them. That's why the mistress keeps me around. And, well, I'm quite a good secretary, so she keeps me around for that as well."

Senthi didn't know whether to be excited or shocked. "So you're a spy?"

"You could call it that."

Suddenly Senthi remembered something else. "And she, er, the mistress said, when she said I'm apprenticed in the... Ruzyn, she said the name of the Nameless!"

"Yes. Venla is a grand master among his servants, she's entitled to use his name. So are you, now you're her apprentice. Archan spoke to her about you, that's why she had me find you."

"But isn't she, aren't we on the wrong side? On the side of evil?"

"Venla would say," said Ruzyn, "that there is no right or wrong side, no good or evil, only strong or weak, and she is on the side that is strong."

That was exactly what Venla did say the following day, when Senthi came to her for another lesson. "Our Guild, the Guild of Archan, is the strong one. The Guild of the Nameless attracts weaklings, people who can't fend for themselves. We cull our weaklings, they protect them."

She worked Senthi hard, making her aware of her strength and its limits. Exhausted, Senthi retreated into her inner place by the willow. Venla yanked her back painfully. "Not that way! That's a child's place. You must make a stronghold."

Senthi thought of the soft clay of the river bank, clay shaped into bricks, bricks dried in the sun, baked in the oven. She built a small shelter. "Better," Venla said. "Make it real stone when you can." Senthi nodded, too tired to say anything.
It became the pattern of her days. Mornings in Venla's room for lessons, working until she was exhausted because Venla stretched her as far as she could go. As she learned more, she got harder assignments: she was never allowed to do anything easy. She forgot what it was like not to be tired.

After lessons she helped out in the house or the kitchen. Halla and Alaise, the maids, were friendly enough but didn't include her in their gossip; probably they didn't know where she stood. Frankly, she didn't really know that herself.
Chapter 6

The Feast of Archan was coming. By now Senthi was used to people cheerfully saying the name of the Nameless, but it was disconcerting that she had missed the Feast of Timoine yet again. Just as it had been in her first season in the Temple, she had been so busy with lessons and finding her place in the house that she hadn't noticed that it was almost summer already. Inside the house they were hardly bothered by the weather, but Ruzyn had started taking Senthi out every day "because you're pale enough already" and though it was usually in the early evening, the heat and humidity were oppressive.

They went to the market, through the streets full of little shops in the tradespeople's quarters, and one glorious time to see the king's flagship in the harbour, freshly painted dark green under the waterline and white on top, with white sails and yellow pennants and the figurehead in the shape of a swan with outstretched wings. Ruzyn bought Senthi some hair ribbons: her hair was growing long again.

Senthi had money of her own now, too. Ruzyn had wangled pocket money from Venla, one rider each quarter-feast, when she heard about the two riders Lan had taken. The one she'd got belatedly for the Feast of Timoine was in the pocket under her skirt, but she never saw anything she wanted to buy.

Venla sent for the dressmaker. Senthi was still wearing Alaise's outgrown skirts and tunics. She would need clothes of her own,
something for the feast as well as something for everyday. Even the maids got new dresses. There were bolts of scratchy new linen for the girls and Ruzyn to make into underclothes and plain shirts. The handyman came in to sew his own shirts, which he did with surprising delicacy for someone with hands that large.

Venla actually came out of her workroom to concern herself with the clothes. The dressmaker wanted to put Senthi in red, and she would have chosen violet herself, but Venla picked out darkest midnight blue. It made Senthi's hair look dazzlingly white. She was measured on all sides, wrapped in thin cloth to make patterns, measured again and sent away to sew more shirts while the dressmaker and her assistants worked.

It took days. Senthi knew that they were making clothes for everybody, not just for her, but she was still stiff with anticipation.

Finally she was allowed in the front room to try on the gown. The bodice, cleverly cut to hide the fact that she had nothing yet to hide, was set off with shiny ribbon and little circles of silvered glass. The skirt was full and wide, almost but not quite trailing. The sleeves were of lacy open-work, gathered at the wrist. She could wear a long-sleeved white shirt under it, or if it was very warm only her bare skin. There were points on the sleeves that partway covered her hands-- if her protection slipped, the markings would still be mostly hidden.

"It's splendid," Halla said. "Makes you look fifteen."

"At least," said Alaise, who was all of fifteen herself.

There was a set of underclothes to go with the dress, made of something slippery, softer than well-worn linen, flowing through Senthi's hands like water. "It's silk," Ruzyn said. "It's from the south. Not where my father came from, but still further south, where it's winter when we have summer."

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Midsummer arrived. The house filled with masters in the Guild, dozens of them, more than Senthi had ever thought could exist. But then Ruzyn had told her that nearly half of all the people in Valdyas lived in Essle. They
had a meeting in the afternoon that Senthi wasn't invited to attend. She sat in her room, banned from the kitchen because it was full of people putting the final touches to the food.

*Senthi.* It was the first time that Venla had spoken directly to her mind. And through the protection on her room, too. *Come. You're wanted.* Venla made her stand on the table and presented her proudly: "This is my apprentice. She'll go far." Senthi could feel the masters assaying her, calculating her worth. She wrapped herself in protection like a cloak, trying to keep herself whole under their scrutiny.

The mood was broken by the cook and the maids bringing in the food. It was so crowded that people couldn't sit down to eat. There were heaped platters of pies, pasties, dumplings, confections and other things to eat while standing and talking. Halla and Alaise moved through the crowd with pitchers of wine. In a corner some people were tuning viols, drowned out by the general noise. Ruzyn was nowhere to be seen, but Senthi knew she was in the sleeping alcove in Venla's workroom, watching and listening with her mind, undetected.

Senthi was wearing the midnight-blue gown. Ruzyn had painstakingly put her hair up with the new ribbons and a great many pins. It was so straight and slippery that it threatened to come down unless it was forcibly restrained. "If it doesn't hold, just take all the pins and ribbons out and run a comb through," Ruzyn had said. "You'll look a little younger, but everybody will have seen you already."

She had looked in the polished copper mirror in Venla's room, and with her hair in a coil at the back of her head she did indeed look at least fifteen. Even at fifteen she'd have been easily the youngest at the feast, except for a baby asleep in a carry-cot.

People wanted to talk to her. Venla had told her to say as little as possible about herself while still staying polite. It turned out to be very hard. The wine was stronger than she was used to, it was awkward to manipulate her goblet and plate, and she was usually too busy talking to eat. Her hair came down. She felt more and more uncomfortable. She wanted to retreat into her inner place, but she was sure Venla would notice and object, even though it was mostly stone by now.
At least she knew enough to talk intelligently to people about their own affairs. Most of the things she knew came from her trips with Ruzyn. She realised now that Ruzyn hadn't only been taking her outside to keep her from becoming too pale, or even to nurture their growing friendship; she'd been teaching her the town.

As she was trying to get away from a man who was a little too interested in the "mystery maiden in Venla's house" --he reminded her of the Mighty Servant, though he wasn't half his size-- Venla came to her rescue. "There is someone here who wants to teach you," she said, taking her to meet a lean man dressed austerely in black. "Faran, this is Senthí, she knows nothing yet."

Senthí felt a blush creep up in her face, but Faran smiled at her and said, "About fencing, she means."

"Fencing! You want to teach me to fence?"

"Venla thought it might be a good idea if you could wield a sword. You're young and inexperienced enough not to have picked up any bad habits. Can you use that little dagger of yours?" She was wearing it in the folds of her gown, not exactly hidden but not entirely in the open either.

Her face became hotter. "Yes. Well, only for what it's for. It's not as if I can fight with it."

"What is it for, if I may ask?"

"To kill people who are already dying and Naigha can't take because their body won't die." It came out rushed, all in one breath, and she hung her head and stared at her feet in the new slippers, wishing she could sink through the floor.

Faran took her by the arm and led her into Venla's workroom, where it was very quiet: only the baby's mother was there, Aine the doctor, nursing him. Ruzyn was behind the curtain, but it was unlikely that Faran would notice her. "It's a good thing you didn't raise your voice just now," he said. "Not everyone needs to know where you come from."

"I know. I'm sorry. When you asked like that I couldn't help myself."

"I'm the one who should be sorry. I have that effect on people."
"Did you know - did the mistress tell you?"

"I know about those daggers, and I did suspect that you might have acquired it --ah-- legitimately." He touched the sheath before Senthi could stop him, but carefully, almost reverently. "There's great power there. Have you used it yet?"

"Never."

"It's not everyone who can kill out of mercy," he said. "Now, how soon can you come for your first lesson?"

"When the mistress lets me."

He sighed. "Yes, it would be like that. I'll arrange it with her. Do you want to be collected, or can you find the school by yourself?"

Senthi tried frantically to think of the right thing to call him. Venla had used his name, though he hadn't actually told her. "I don't know where it is, Master," she said.

"Never mind, I'll send someone round."

When they came back to the front room it was much less crowded. The viol players struck up a lively tune. A young man --younger than most, anyway-- asked Senthi to dance.

"Sorry, I don't dance."

"It's easy. I'll show you." He swept her away among the couples already on the floor. Her feet did the right things without her consciously steering them. Gradually it dawned on her that he was doing the steering, guiding her with his mind. She opened up to it, enjoying the music and the steps, learning from him at the same time.

"See? You're not all that bad."

"Not any more." She grinned. "Thank you." They introduced themselves when they realised they'd been dancing for quite some time without doing that. He was a wine merchant's son, called Athal like the king. He'd become a master in the Guild almost a year ago; this was his first masters' meeting.

"We'll probably go to the bonfire in a moment," he said. "Last year all the masters showed up at about midnight." He had hardly finished saying
it when Venla called for attention and everybody went out, spreading over
bridges and small rowboats but all going the same way. Senthí went with
Athal and a few others, who had brought a boat.

They ended up on a little island where a house had recently been
demolished. Several young people were building a pyre of bits of the
house that the builders hadn't taken away to reuse, in the light of lanterns
and torches tied to posts. Senthí was surprised to see that most were her
own age or only a little older. These must be the apprentices and
journeymen who hadn't been allowed to come to the meeting. She'd never
seen any of them before.

Some of the journeymen came to greet them. "Athal! We've missed
you! You shouldn't have become a master so soon. What have you
brought, a new apprentice? Where have you been hiding her?"

"This is Senthí, she is Venla's apprentice." They crowded around them.
Everybody wanted to see Senthí. Some wanted to touch her as if they
wondered whether she was real. She dropped most of the protection that
she realised she had been wearing since Venla made her stand on the
table. These people weren't judging her, but admiring her. It must be the
dress.

"Venla has been hiding you, eh?" a girl in red asked.

Senthí shrugged. "I don't know if she meant to hide me from you. Just
that she was teaching me all the time."

"Can't have been all the time," the girl said. "I saw you at the harbour
when the White Swan was in. With that secretary of Venla's, what's her
name, Rusla."

"Ruzyn." She couldn't remember this girl, but there had been lots of
people there to look at the ship and she'd been so busy gawking at it
herself that she hadn't noticed who was gifted and in which Guild.

More masters arrived, Venla among them. The crowd took on a
semblance of order. The pyre was now so high that Senthí couldn't look
over it. Someone gave Venla a torch. She stood next to the pyre, holding
it in the air. The atmosphere grew expectant. Someone next to Senthí
said, barely audibly, "She can do without the torch, can't she?"
Venla threw the torch on the ground. It lay there, burning quietly. "Senthi," she said. "The invocation."

It was surprisingly difficult to remember the First Invocation, the prayer to Timoine. And she’d started each day with it for years when she was a child: from the time she was barely old enough not to mangle the words to her first morning in the Temple of Naigha. "Great goddess Timoine--" She stumbled through it, "be also with us" and heard another voice take up the next invocation: Faran's voice. "Great god Archan--" Of course, it was to Archan, the way Venla said it before lessons, not Anshen as it had always been at home and in the Temple in Valdis.

A man's voice continued with the invocation to Mizran, "fame of maturity, giver of wealth", and a very old woman with the last one, "great goddess Naigha, who art at the end... reaper of old age --"

Venla pushed Senthi closer to the pyre. "Light it. As I taught you."

Senthi felt the blood rise in her cheeks, her ears, her scalp. Yes, they'd practised this. She was no good at it. She forced her mind to the centre of the pile of wood, trying to see something that would light with little effort. There. A bit of straw or thatch, probably from the roof. Come on. You're hot. Hotter. Yes, hotter still. Burn. A thin tendril of smoke curled up from the wood. There was some cheering, but Venla put out a hand to silence it. Senthi thought more heat at the straw, trying to make it set the wood alight. Burn!

The feeling of expectation in the crowd grew. Anger started to rise in her, contained impatience, power to grab and use. Flames burst out from the top of the pyre, spreading rapidly to the sides. The cheering started again, whole-hearted now. Someone clapped Senthi on the back, Faran or Athal, because they were on either side of her. They lifted her each on a shoulder, high above the crowd.

"That was well done, at the fire," Venla said when Senthi was back on her feet. Senthi waited for the inevitable censure, but it didn't come.

"Thank you." She thought for a moment. "May I ask something?"

"Ask."
"Why were they all so excited? What did I do that was extraordinary? Couldn't anyone have lit the fire?"

"Not with the power of their mind alone. I can do that because I'm a grand master."

"But I could do it, and I'm only an apprentice."

Venla's only answer was a smile.

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Senthi appeared at Faran's fencing school dressed in a pair of old hose that she'd found in a chest in the attic and a comfortably worn shirt. She stood on the sand, feeling sheepish, while Faran took a group of pupils who looked younger than she was through a complicated exercise. He noticed her and gave a mental nod, but finished the lesson before he came over to her.

Someone tossed him a towel. "Thanks. Ah, Senthi. Welcome." He threw the towel around his neck and took Senthi to a shed where there was a rack of swords in all sizes. "Have you used one before? Oh, no, you said you hadn't. Let's see..."

He gave her a sword. She gripped it awkwardly. "You're right-handed? This one will do until you have some skill. You'll be wanting a sword of your own then."

The sword felt surprisingly light in her hand. It wasn't until she flexed her wrist experimentally that she noticed that it was in fact quite heavy. It was the balance that made it seem light: most of the weight was close to her hand.

Faran took the sword from the scabbard at his side and showed her how to move. "These are the basic movements. You can take the sword home and practise, but not until I've seen you do it right or you'll learn the wrong habits."

After a while she cautiously probed at his mind and found that she could let him guide her as Athal had done in the dancing. It was a lot easier after that, though it didn't help with the increasing pull in the
muscles of her arms and legs. "Yes, that's good! You're starting to pick it up-- oh. You're picking it up from me."

Senthi blushed and shrugged. "Athal taught me to dance that way. It works. Does it bother you?"

"Not now I know. It's... well... unusual. You still need to practise, though, your mind may know but your body has to learn. You can't count on only knowing what to do in a fight, it has to become reflex."

Senthi practised. It cost her a lot of aching muscles, sometimes so much that she couldn't sleep, but it did become reflex after a while. She went to the sword school every morning before Venla's lesson and practised in the afternoon, usually in the tiny yard. When it rained, which it seemed to do much more often in Essle than in Valdis or even Tilis, she used the scullery. The cook scowled at her, but was too much in awe of the length of steel in her hand to send her away.

This was something she was good at. She learned --discovered, really, nobody taught her, she wasn't sure if even Faran knew how-- to extend her mind into the sword and make it part of her, as if she and the sword were one creature.

Venla took an interest in her fencing. Faran had probably spoken to her. "You need a sword of your own," she said. "Ruzyn will take you to the swordsmith."

The swordsmith made Senthi swing the practice sword, took it out of her hands and growled at it. Then she gave her a rough sword-shaped piece of iron to try, made some measurements of Senthi's body with a frayed length of string and told her to come back in six days.

After six days, they went back and found a perfect gleaming sword waiting for Senthi. "I've made it on the large side," the smith said. "I suppose you intend to grow."

"Yes," said Senthi, blushing. She'd recently noticed that she was indeed growing, and not only growing taller.

She took the sword and ran through an exercise with it. Yes, this was made for a larger and stronger Senthi, true, but so well-balanced that it felt as if she was larger and stronger already.
Chapter 7

The feast of Mizran was upon them before Senthi thought it could be autumn. Venla took Ruzyn and Senthi to the temple for the celebration. Neither of them had any first fruits of their work to sacrifice. Senthi could hardly offer her work with Venla or her sword practice, and Ruzyn's work was just as insubstantial. Venla gave them a well-filled purse to give to the priests when they came for the collection.

Venla herself would be at the front, wearing her embroidered mantle. She had the position of a priestess in the Temple of Mizran, though she hardly ever made an appearance there.

Senthi was uneasy in the temple: she knew the Mighty Servant would be there. She didn't look at all like the scared little girl in Red Aule's house any more, and anyway they'd be in the middle of the crowd, but she cloaked herself in protection just to be sure. "What have you done?" Ruzyn asked. "I know you're there, but I can only see you if I look kind of past you. It's like trying to catch water."

"Good. I want to be invisible. I know it works, people are bumping into me." She took Ruzyn's hand and squeezed it to convince both Ruzyn and herself that she still existed.

Senthi couldn't see Venla among the multitude of bright-cloaked priests, but she could see the Mighty Servant on the dais in front of the statue of Mizran. He hadn't changed a bit, unless it was that he was fatter still. He was looking out over the crowd. You don't see me. He didn't, of
course. He wouldn't have seen her even if she hadn't been keeping herself inconspicuous. The temple was full of people, most of them taller than Senthi.

When people started streaming out after the service, Venla met them again, another priestess in tow. "This is the principal of the trade school," she said to Senthi. "You're to start tomorrow. Afternoons only until Faran and I are done teaching you."

Yet another set of lessons. Did Venla think she could stretch herself infinitely?

"We'll be glad to have you," the principal said. She was middle-aged, squat and olive-skinned. If she had any gifts, they were purely of the financial kind. "If you'll come with me we can see how far along you are already."

Senthi followed her to a small office on a side corridor. The principal gave her things to read and made her do calculations. "You'll do," she said. "We get children here who can barely read. Venla tells me you've been to school in Valdis."

"Yes, for one year. But I could read before that."

"Well, come an hour after mid-day and bring a slate. We'll put you in the intermediate class. You may be behind in some things, but don't hesitate to ask." She led Senthi back to the temple, where Venla and Ruzyn were still standing. And the Mighty Servant was with them.

Senthi wanted to disappear, but it was impossible. Venla was already taking her by the arm and pulling her to her side. "This is my apprentice, the one I was telling you about," she said. The Mighty Servant --from close up it was even more evident that he hadn't changed at all-- looked at her with his piggy eyes, screwing them up even more, searchingly, but without recognition.

"So you're going to become one of us as well," he said. A whiff of lavender and elderflower came with the words, as if he breathed it as well as splashing it over himself.
"I'm sorry, I don't understand," Senthi said. She was beginning to sweat. She couldn't stay invisible if Venla was drawing attention to her. It was pointless anyway: he had seen her already.

"Most people who go to the trade school end up in the Temple one way or another."

She didn't know what to say to that. She realised that she didn't even know how to address a Mighty Servant. Perhaps that was a question to ask at school. She smiled and nodded, trying to look suave and mature so she wouldn't give him any ideas. Or worse, bring up memories.

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Ruzyn gave Senthi a slate and a stylus, and a long heavy parcel as well. "My present for you for the Feast," she said.

Senthi blushed. "I don't have a present for you."

"I don't mind. Don't friends give each other presents on the Feast of Mizran where you come from?"

"Not in Tilis, at least not anyone I knew. And the last Feast of Mizran I was in the Temple of Naigha." She started to unwrap the parcel. There was a long leather thing inside that she didn't recognise. It was stiff, as if there was wood inside the leather.

"What is it?"

"A scabbard. For your sword. I had it made."

Senthi got the new sword from her room. It fit exactly. "You strap it to your back," Ruzyn said. "Like this."

The weight of the sword on her back felt very strange, but comforting at the same time. She tried to draw it over her shoulder and almost hit the kettle. "I'll have to ask Faran to teach me to use it."

"It should really be at your side, but I thought you'd trip over it. There's a loop to put it on your belt when you're taller, look."

Senthi grinned. "Not for years, probably, at the rate I've been going."
Faran approved. He taught her to draw the sword without hitting anything she didn't want to hit and to compensate for its length. "It's a good weapon. You can tell that Rava made it, she knows what she's doing."

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Senthi took to the trade school like a duckling to water. After a few weeks they moved her up out of the intermediate class, probably because of everything she'd picked up from Venla. She was learning trade routes and advanced bookkeeping. Very soon she'd be doing a stint of trainee work at the Temple of Mizran.

"It's just clerking," said a stocky boy who had done it already. "Should be easy for you. At least you've got good handwriting. They had to teach me to write properly first." He still wrote in a dreadful scrawl, except when it was for the teachers and he was trying harder.

Her days were very full now, first sword lessons with Faran, then a lesson from Venla, and school in the afternoon. She took a sword to school --not her good one, but a training sword much the same size and weight-- to keep up with her practising between classes. People got interested and took up the sword themselves. It became a little club that trained every afternoon after class with Senthi as the unofficial leader, though some of them were much more competent than she was. She didn't tell Faran about it --she had a nagging feeling that he might not like it-- but he did compliment her because he noticed that she was keeping in practice.

Ruzyn still took her around town whenever they both had time: on the Day of Mizran, when there was no school, and on those mornings when Venla had something to do in town. Senthi recognised Red Aule's house on one of their trips, on the edge of the worst neighbourhood she'd seen yet. She could reconstruct the route she'd taken out of the house: right through a street where she wouldn't want to walk alone by daylight. It was bad enough with a sword on her back and the large strong Ruzyn at her side.
"This is Hind Town," Ruzyn said. "Also called the Pit. You don't want to be caught here unawares."

"I know." Ruzyn knew that she knew, of course, but it needed to be said. "I didn't know Red Aule's house was here".

"The best place to live if you don't want to be seen too much," Ruzyn said, "and you don't have the money to hide in the Shallows the way the mistress does."

Senthí had never thought of Venla's house as a hiding place, but they did keep to themselves a lot. Venla did most of her business at the Temple and in other people's houses in town. Only Guild meetings were in her own house: no outsiders ever came to her door.

Clerking in the Temple of Mizran was not only easy, but interesting and useful as well. Most of the students who did it just copied whatever came under their eyes, almost without reading it. Senthí read everything. Within days she began to see patterns. It wasn't long until she started to understand them, extrapolated, and noticed that her predictions tended to come true.

She went to see her superior, an old man called Airath with piercing eyes. "I want to put some money in a ship," she said.

He looked at her through his eyelashes, measuring her. "And how much money have you got to put in a ship?"

"Five riders come Midsummer."

He didn't laugh. Only a slight smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "Well," he said, "you know how to do the paperwork. Do it."

She didn't wait until Midsummer, but bought a very small share in a ship going to Solay with the four riders she already had. It wouldn't be expected back until the winter after next. She could wait. She set up an account book for herself, and only when she plotted out the year ahead she noticed that she had not only missed the Feast of Timoine again, but the Feast of Naigha before that as well.
Senthi had grown out of the blue dress. In fact she had grown out of everything. She'd turned into a woman almost overnight. The clothes she wore to work were made-over castoffs of Venla's. She was allowed to choose her own colour for the Feast of Archan and appeared in deep violet, which made her look three years older than her age again. At least she didn't have to be presented this time. She only had to light the fire. Even the invocation fell to a newer apprentice.

The day after the Feast she went back to school after weeks of clerking at the Temple. Some students had disappeared probably gone into their parents' business as they had intended and there were some new faces. It was strange to be back. Most things they were doing didn't seem relevant now she'd seen the Temple from the inside. She thought she might go to the principal and talk about it, but the principal got in first.

"Senthi," she said as she came into the classroom, "please come to my office after class."

Though Senthi spent the whole class worrying, it was nothing to worry about. "Airath speaks highly of you," the principal said. "He would like to have you as his assistant. It would be only afternoons, like school and your traineeship. If you're interested you can tell him or me."

"I don't know. I'll have to talk about it with my mistress."

"I'll talk to Venla if you're more comfortable with that. We're old friends."

Senthi hesitated. It was a tempting offer, but this was something she had to do herself. "I'll talk to her first," she said.

Venla grudgingly allowed Senthi to try. "As long as you don't neglect your studies with me and Faran," she said. "And half of your earnings go into the household."

Half of the earnings of a half-time junior clerk would be five riders a year, marginally more than her pocket money. "All right." She thought of all the other advantages of the job: to be one of the first to know what
happened, to meet important people, to see the inner workings of the trading world. She knew that Venla knew that as well.

Ruzyn approved wholeheartedly. "You'll be right inside things," she said. "Make sure you tell the mistress some juicy bits of gossip every now and again to keep her happy."

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Working for real was much more interesting than just being sent by the school and doing whatever other people didn't want to do. People told her things; they took her seriously at last. Airath put her in charge of the private sales of shares in ships, transferring shares in delayed ships to whoever wanted them at any price the original owner would accept. The Temple didn't handle the actual sales; they only wrote up the bills of sale and charged a percentage.

After a few weeks at that work, Senthi could write a bill of sale without thinking. She could also calculate the fee in her head, but Airath didn't allow her to do that. "You should write the sums down so the clients can see," he said. "They won't believe you otherwise and you'll have to do it on paper after all." She grumbled, but did it Airath's way.

When she got her first quarter's pay, she borrowed four riders from Ruzyn and bought a share in a ship that she knew was underway. She'd heard a conversation in the corridor just outside her office. The priest and the merchant hadn't noticed her, because she habitually put protection on herself when she was working. It was to keep out of the way of the Mighty Servant --though at almost fourteen she was practically sure he would find her too old-- but it also worked very well to overhear things she wasn't supposed to.

The ship came in and her five riders turned to fifty.

She didn't feel that she should give half of that to Venla or to the household, but put it in her Temple account. If --when-- another opportunity came up she'd be prepared. It was a good thing. She misjudged badly a few times, losing her investment, but she never parted with large sums and there was always something to start over with. She
didn't know whether Venla knew anything about her business endeavours; she didn't want to bring up the subject in front of her. She dutifully relayed the Temple gossip, but Venla knew many more people than she did and had usually heard the news already.

By the end of her first year in the Temple she had earned enough to buy a real share in a ship. She picked the *Queen Mialle*, a veteran of several voyages to Albetire, familiar with storms and pirates. She intended to go to the harbour to look at it, but Venla kept her busy, preparing her for the journeyman's trial that she said couldn't be put off much longer.
"You are ready to be tested," Venla said. "I've arranged a fight for you with the servants of the Nameless. Go and make yourself familiar with the terrain. It's the old training ground of the Order of the Sworn."

Senthi had heard that name before. "Of the Guild of the Nameless? Isn't that dangerous?"

"They're not using it any more, and they only ever used it for weapons training anyway. There still may be some power floating around; use it if you can. Ruzyn knows where it is."

The air on the old training field was indeed still thick with power, so much that it made Ruzyn shiver. Senthi walked all over it, feeling the currents, marking uneven ground that could trip her. According to Venla they would be using swords "and everything else you have". That it had been used by the Order would probably give the other person an advantage, but Senthi was determined to know everything there was to know before that other person showed up.

Somebody did show up quite soon. It was a young man, wearing a sword and wrapped in strong protection.

"You're early," Senthi said. "I understood I was only here to reconnoitre, not to fight yet."

"So am I," he said. He dropped most of his protection and turned out to be an apprentice in the Guild of Archan, almost a journeyman, like Senthi herself. "I thought this was my testing ground."
"Well, it's mine. Are you expecting someone?"

"Not just now." He was exuding hostility that she could almost touch. "I wish you'd go away."

"I was here first."

"If you want a fight, you can fight me." He put a hand on the hilt of his sword. It was on his belt; he was quite a lot taller than Senthi.

"I'll fight the enemy, thank you." She turned away, but he was close behind her, grabbing her by the shoulders and turning her around. She tried to knee him in the groin, but he held her at arm's length and she missed. He let go of her, made a quick motion as if to punch her in the stomach, then stepped back and drew his sword. "Fight."

Senthi drew her own sword. There was nothing for it now. They circled one another warily. The boy might be taller and probably stronger and better trained, but Senthi had already explored the holes and power currents of the site before he arrived. She threw up a weak wall of *anea* between them that she could see through easily, hoping it would slow him down. For now, he didn't seem any slower, but then she didn't know how fast he was normally.

Their swords engaged. The sound startled Senthi: they'd been circling in silence. He wasn't as well-trained as she'd thought. Taller and stronger, true. Faster at the beginning, but his endurance started to falter quickly and he didn't have anything to counter the screen still hanging in the air. It did slow him down a bit now, though his sword cut right through it.

Senthi's mind grew strangely detached, as if she was seeing other people fight. Faran had warned her of that. "It's the fighter's haze. Don't allow it, it hinders your judgement." She snapped herself back to full awareness, just in time to see the boy take a step back and let something fly from his left hand. *That's my dagger.* It took all of her determination not to stand and gape at it, but to take action.

She threw the full force of her mind at the dagger to impede it. Time came almost to a stop. The dagger flew towards her, slowly but with purpose. At the same time someone came into view on her left --Ruzyn!--
throwing herself in front of her. Senthi tried to push the flying dagger aside, to make it miss both of them. It wobbled erratically for a moment, like a queen wasp newly awake in spring, but returned to its course.

The flow of time became normal again. The dagger hit Ruzyn just above the collarbone, piercing the artery. She collapsed and Senthi caught her, awkwardly, the sword still in her right hand, and lowered her to the ground.

The boy stood in the same spot he'd thrown from, watching. Senthi put the strongest protection she could manage over herself and Ruzyn. Never mind that it would probably attract hordes of servants of the Nameless. She wanted something the boy couldn't get through without hurting himself.

Blood was pumping from Ruzyn's throat. Her face had gone grey-brown, like mud. Senthi found the pressure point and pushed hard on it. Thank Naigha for Cynla and her lessons. The blood flowed more sluggishly. No place to bind it off. If she took the dagger out the wound would open up. If she didn't take the dagger out--

Ruzyn made a small sound, trying to speak. Think it, Senthi thought to her, confident that Ruzyn would hear it. She remembered the first time the High Priestess had spoken to her mind in the Temple of Naigha and tried to use the same force.

Let me go. Ruzyn's inner voice was weak, not only with the pain, but she was untrained as well. Remember-- of Naigha--

Senthi touched the dagger. It turned a little, making Ruzyn moan softly. She took the dagger by the hilt and pulled it out. Blood spurted all over the two of them. She felt Ruzyn's body go limp. A gust of cold wind brushed her and she knew that if she turned her head just a little, she'd see the folds of a blue cloak as Naigha came to take Ruzyn's spirit away.

She sang the Song of Passing, all she remembered of it, until the boy's voice interrupted her. Somehow she had dropped the protection, or he had breached it without her noticing.

"So you've killed her. That was what you wanted all along, didn't you?"
"You killed her! Did I throw that dagger? Did I give it to you?" Senthi spat out. "The curse of Naigha over you! May you die a horrible death, nameless and unmourned! No sheet to wrap your body in, no one to sing over you, no one to bury you! Rats will eat your flesh, dogs will carry your bones away!"

She could have cursed him for hours more, but people were coming who she hadn't noticed until now: a man and a woman in dark blue uniforms. That must be the Order of the Sworn. The woman took the boy by the arms and restrained him. The man laid a hand on Senthi's shoulder.

"You'd better come along," he said, surprisingly gently. "There's nothing you can do for her now."

"At least let me call the priestesses," Senthi said.

"We have called the priestesses. There's no need to wait for them. More of us are watching out of sight."

She had no choice but to follow him. The Order house wasn't far. After all, the field had been their training ground. They put her in a small bare room to wait. It didn't feel like a cell; it wasn't locked, not even protected, though the house as a whole was. She could sense several people in the rest of the house. All of them were journeymen or masters in the Guild of the Nameless except one, who must be the boy.

After a while, the gentle-voiced man came to take her to the commander's office. It looked very much like Venla's workroom and even more like Erne's little office in the Temple of Naigha in Valdis, with heaps of papers everywhere. The commander sat behind a table that had obviously been cleared in a hurry. He looked at her searchingly for a long time before speaking.

"So. You're the owner of this dagger?" It was the only thing on the table, lying on a piece of silk. They had cleaned it of Ruzyn's blood.

"Yes."

"That's 'Yes, commander'. How did you come by it?"

"The novice mistress in the Temple of Naigha gave it to me." It was impossible to lie to this man, even if she had wanted to.
"The Temple of Naigha here in Essle? They have never heard of you."
Senthí tried not to show her relief. "No, in Valdis, commander."
"Were you a novice there?"
"Yes, commander. For one year."
"Why did you leave?"
"I was scared, commander. I thought I'd killed someone."
She could almost hear him thinking: another one? "And? Did you kill someone?"
"No, commander, I hit her in anger and knocked her out."
He nodded. "And you came to Essle. Many people come to Essle to escape the consequences of their deeds. You're Venla's apprentice, I take it?"
"Yes, commander."
"Did you know when you started the fight that it would be your journeyman's trial?"

*What?* "Erm, commander, I didn't start the fight, I only came to feel out the terrain and then this young man came and picked a fight." *Journeyman's trial?* She hadn't looked at herself thoroughly yet, but yes, it was true.

"Hmm. Were you aware that your opponent used *semsin* to propel the dagger?"

Had she been aware of that? It was obvious, looking back, by the way the dagger had come back on course when she'd pushed it out of the way. "Not at the time, but I know now that he did."

"Show me."

She had done that with Venla, of course. Countless times. She took the commander's hand and flinched from his touch, perversely pleased that he flinched from hers as well. Touching the mind of a servant of the Nameless felt prickly, like picking up a hedgehog.

She showed him the whole fight, reliving it from the time the boy appeared to Ruzyn's death in her arms. She was sweating profusely by
the time she opened her eyes. There were shiny drops on the commander's forehead as well.

"Thank you. I know that it is a true image. You're not to blame for anything that happened. You're free to go. We will see that you get home." He pushed the dagger over to her.

It was the female Sworn who took her home, the one who had caught the boy. She was grim and silent all the way to Venla's house. Senthi expected to be left at the door or even on the footbridge, but the woman went in with her, brushed off Alaise who tried to take her cloak, and demanded to see Venla.

When Venla appeared the two women went into the workroom together, leaving Senthi in the kitchen with the maids. "What happened?" Alaise asked. "Did you have a fight? Where's Ruzyn? Why did that woman bring you home? Did she arrest you?"

"Ruzyn is dead," Senthi said. "She got killed. Someone tried to kill me and he killed her instead." She felt all numb, knowing that she would cry if she let herself, but she didn't know how to let herself. It was already hard to breathe.

"On purpose?"

"She threw herself in front of me." Suddenly, all the tears she'd been holding back came out at once. Alaise handed her a towel: a handkerchief wouldn't have been enough. Halla came with a bowl and a washcloth and clean clothes.

When she was almost herself again, Venla was standing in the doorway to her workroom. "Come, Senthi."

She went in with leaden feet. The woman Sworn was standing at Venla's desk, still looking grim.

"Hylse of the Order has told me what happened," Venla said. "It appears that you are not to blame for Ruzyn's death. Also, you seem to have become a journeyman all by yourself."

"Yes, mistress."
"I shall need another secretary." Now she's going to tell me that I'm to quit working in the Temple, Senthi thought. "If you know of anyone, tell them to come and see me."

Well, at least Venla didn't expect her to be the next secretary. "I will, mistress."

Venla nodded. "The fact that you're a journeyman now does not in the least relieve you from my lessons," she said. "We will work even harder." She seemed to have forgotten Hylse of the Order completely. "Show me what happened."

Again. At least Venla's touch didn't hurt. It was more distant to her this time, as if she was remembering a very clear dream. Only when she came to Ruzyn's plea to let her go was she moved.

"You shouldn't let yourself be carried away by things that are past," Venla said. "Control is what matters. Show me again."

She showed it again, hardening herself against her feelings. Hylse of the Order watched them impassively, as if standing guard. Belatedly, Venla noticed that she was still there.

"You can go home now," she said. "You know quite enough."

Hylse left, scowling. Senthi was alone with Venla, in the middle of what had turned out to be a lesson.

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The Queen Mialle was still in port. Senthi leaned against a pile of bales to watch her being loaded. It was strange to be here alone. Ruzyn should have been with her, the way she had always been before. She tried to keep the tears away that started to well up in her eyes.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" a voice said next to her. She started. It was a young man, about her own age or a little older, with unruly brown hair and a friendly, intelligent face. He was gifted, but untrained, possibly unaware of it. He looked strangely familiar.
She nodded. Where had she seen him before? Not in school, surely. He bit his lip as if he, too, was trying to remember something. "You're never Senthi!"

"Last time I looked I was," she said. Suddenly it all fell into place. This was the boy she'd looked after when he was ill, the one she'd given her hacked-off braid to, who had helped her run away in his clothes and given her two riders and a bag of food. The boy she had come to like in spite of herself. He'd grown. Well, so had she. "Rovan."

"Exactly," he said with a grin. "Never expected to see you here."

"Well." She didn't really know what to say. "I didn't expect to see you here either."

"Father sold the house. We've come to live here. My brother's on that ship."

"It had better come back, then. I've got sixty riders in it."

He gasped. "What did you sell to get sixty riders? Or did my two breed?"

"I've been working. And putting some money in other ships."

"I think Father would like to meet you then." A blush crept into his face and he tried to hide it by looking away. "Good to see you, anyway. How have you been?"

She shrugged. "All right, I suppose. Well, not all that good. My best friend died."

"What happened?"

"An accident." She started to say more, but thought better of it: her voice was unreliable.

"That's too bad." He put an arm around her shoulders. She leaned against him, glad of his human warmth.

They stood on the dock for a long time. Rovan was the first to speak. "Let's go and have an ale or something."

"I haven't got any money on me."
"It's all right, I'll cadge some off Eldan." He disappeared up the gangplank and came back with a jingling purse. "He's got an enormous allowance that he isn't going to use until he comes back."

They walked along the docks, sometimes talking, sometimes in companionable silence. It was as if they had been friends for all that time, ever since they'd last met in Valdis. Something in Senthi's mind said Don't get too close, you'll lose this one as well. She ignored it.

"Let's go in here and share a water-pipe," Rovan said. It was a ramshackle inn right on the waterfront. "The Drunken Seahorse." He pointed at the lopsided iron unicorn on the roof.

"That's hardly a seahorse. Not even a horse really."

"I know, but it's been called that for three hundred years, Eldan says."

"I can't smoke. Venla will kill me."

"Why ever? All right, you'll get woozy, but it's only for an evening, you'll be perfectly all right tomorrow." He sounded as if he spoke from experience.

"She'd notice. She says it's bad for my concentration. I have to be sharp all the time."

"Who's this Venla that she can forbid you to have fun?"

"My teacher. I live with her."

Rovan sighed and shrugged exaggeratedly. "Well, let's go in and have a drink then at least. Can you have one mug of ale?"

"I think so." They went in. It was gloomy inside, lit only by candles on the tables and a few in sconces on the wall. Senthi felt uneasy, but she couldn't determine exactly why. They got the ale and found a place to sit in a corner.

"What's eating you?" Rovan asked.

"I don't know." She shivered. It must be something in the air. It wasn't cold at all-- far from that, it was still summer, and the inn had been blessedly cool after the heat outside. She opened her mouth to say something about that, and the right words came out. "Gods, the place stinks of the Nameless."
"What? You're deathly pale. Are you all right?"

"I need to get out of here." They left their ale and went out, walking at random and ending up in another inn with another mug of ale.

"Can't you stand smoke?" Rovan asked when Senthi could breathe comfortably again. "I know people like that. They don't have to smoke anything themselves to faint. You did say it stank."

She shook her head. "No, it's not that. It's just that-- do you know you are gifted?"

"Well, yes," he said, puzzled. "What's that got to do with it?"

"You've never had any lessons, have you?"

"No, we didn't find out I was gifted at all until we were on the boat coming here, and Father wants to look for a teacher but not until the Queen Mialle sails, he doesn't have time for anything now."

"I'll find you a teacher. Gods, I'll teach you myself if I have to."

Rovan scratched his head, ruffling his hair even more. "Does that have anything to do with the stink in the Drunken Seahorse?"

"Yes. Everybody there who is gifted is in the Guild of the Nameless. It--well, it makes me sick. There are a lot of gifted people there."

"But there were some people of the Order of the-- Oh. I see. You're in the other Guild."

She nodded. "I was in trouble and I got rescued by Venla. Well, by Venla's secretary, Ruzyn, the one I told you about. My friend."

"The one who had the accident."

"Yes. And then she told me I was apprenticed in the Guild of Archan. Venla did, I mean."

It was painful to see him wince at the name; it brought back memories of her own shock when Venla told her. "You can learn anywhere," she said. "You learn the same things. It's a different path going the same way, that's all."
"Father says the Guilds only fight each other and ordinary people don't notice much. We didn't notice the Guilds much when we were living in Valdis."

"Well, you were ordinary people then, weren't you?" She laughed. "You and I, now, we're extraordinary people." She toasted him with her mug and drank deeply.
Chapter 9

A few weeks before the Feast of Mizran, Airath told Senthi to go to the tailor in Full Moon Street. "You have to have a vestment made," he said. "You can't be sworn in without a proper vestment."

Would that be a mantle like Venla's? She went to Full Moon Street the moment she left work and found three other new clerks there, being measured. The tailor bustled about, jotting down numbers on his cuff, which seemed to be made of paper.

"Hey, I want cuffs like that, I keep forgetting things," a young man from Accounts said.

"I can make some for you," the tailor said. "No trouble at all. But after the Feast, please, we're far too busy now with all you novices."

Novices? Senthi hadn't expected to be a priestess again. But thinking back it was clear from what she'd heard in trade school and at work that everybody who worked in the Temple of Mizran was considered to be in the priesthood.

When the vestment was finished it turned out to be a long straight sleeveless surcoat, stiff with embroidery. Some of the embroidery was gold. Combined with the violet of her best dress the effect was impressive.

Senthi rolled her eyes. "It's just work. It's not as if I've been called or something."

"How many priests of Mizran have actually been called?" Halla said with a smirk. "Most of the time it's the money calling."

That was true; compared to being a priestess of Naigha this wasn't priesting at all. The Temple of Mizran really seemed to worship only money.

This time Senthi went to the front of the temple with Venla. She didn't bother to hide herself; these days she wasn't anything like the frightened twelve-year-old the Mighty Servant had coveted.

The novices stood in a bunch at the side, waiting their turn. They'd left their vestments at the entrance to be taken away by the higher priests. They were a noisy and irreverent group, very different from the Temple of Naigha.

Senthi touched her neighbour on the arm. "That little hat that the tall one is wearing, does it mean anything?"

The girl snickered. "Just that he's vain. He's had it made specially for the feast. It matches his vestments." It did indeed, with the same spirals and triangles embroidered on his robe.

The Mighty Servant was resplendent in a mantle that looked as if it had been cast from solid gold. The embroidery on it was in glowing shades of red, purple and blue. Pictures, Senthi could see, rather than just patterns like the embroidery on her own vestment and that of the tall priest with the little hat, but from where she stood she couldn't make out what they were.

Presently, the service started and the novices' names were called one by one. Senthi didn't notice that it was her turn until someone pushed her forward. "Arnei Senthi, that's you, isn't it?"

She hesitated: should she protect herself after all? She always had a trace of protection on her. It had become habit. She made it just a little stronger.

She walked the twenty steps or so to the foot of the statue, where the Mighty Servant and his attendants were waiting with her surcoat. She
could smell him from halfway across. No elderflower today, but a cloyingly sweet violet scent with a hint of roses. And sweat. He was almost too fat to move and wearing the heavy mantle as well. From closer up she could see that it was embroidered with ships and scenes of people working. If only he would turn around so she could see his back. He didn't, of course; he looked her over appraisingly.

She tried hard not to gag, not to blush, not to waver.

The Mighty Servant put a hand on her head and said something under his breath that she didn't quite catch. It was probably a prayer to Mizran. He took the surcoat from the priestess standing next to him and put it on her, fumbling with the arm-holes as if he had to dress a wayward toddler. Was that on purpose, in order to touch her?

"You're Venla's little apprentice, aren't you?" he said. "Not so little any more, alas. If you were a few years younger... Ah well." He finished dressing her and turned her to face the worshippers. "This is..." The priestess prompted him in a whisper. "Arnei Senthi."

She was pushed among the other novices. The celebrants called someone else. She stood through the rest of the service thinking of various inventive ways to take revenge on the Mighty Servant, but standing there in those clothes in full sight of hundreds of people on a warm humid autumn day, without a chance to even wipe his forehead, should be quite enough punishment. It was a miracle that it hadn't killed him yet. He must be tougher than he looked.

Rovan was waiting for her in the porch. "Get that hot thing off, I'll take you to the bath-house. Father gave me loads of money."

She left her surcoat with those of the other novices in a chest in the vestry. She'd noticed, trying it on at home, that it had her name embroidered inside the neck almost invisibly. As far as she knew she was the only Senthi in the temple --imagine being called Halla, there were at least three novices with that name-- so it wouldn't be hard to find it next time.

They walked for a while, talking. "How did you get Venla to let me go with you?" Senthi asked. "She didn't even try to stop me."
"I didn't. Father did." He grinned. "I think he convinced her that he's a rich merchant and his son is her apprentice's sweetheart."

"Well, that's all true, isn't it." They jostled each other and almost fell into the water laughing. Senthí grabbed the nearest railing and Rovan bumped into her. Suddenly, they were kissing.

"Yes," he said some time later. "It's true. Well, Father isn't all that rich yet, but he will be when the Queen Mialle comes back."

"Speaking of your father, he gave you money for the bath-house, didn't he?"

"We're getting there. I'm taking you to Eldan's favourite place. I've never been there, but he says the food is great. Aren't you hungry?"

At the suggestion her stomach began to grumble. "Now you mention it, yes."

"It's right here." They crossed a narrow bridge, painted blue. Most of the woodwork in this part of town was blue. Perhaps someone had been able to get a barrel of blue paint really cheap.

A cloud of perfumed steam met them when they opened the door to the bath-house. A foreign-looking woman sat behind a little table, glaring at them. "You two together?"

"Yes," Rovan said. "I'm Eldan's brother," he added.

"Don't know no Eldan. You want a private room?"

"Yes, please." He took his purse from inside his shirt.

"You pay afterwards. For if you order extra."

"I see. Can we get something to eat?"

"Can do. Number seven."

Number seven smelt like the Mighty Servant, as Rovan remarked. "I'm not surprised you could smell him where you were," Senthí said. "I nearly fainted up there in front."

The heady flowery scent didn't make them faint, though number seven had a bed large enough to do that on. There was also a bath-tub that could have held five people if they really liked each other. It was half full.
of hot scented water. As they were undressing, an attendant came in with two more buckets of water and poured them in.

Senthi felt the water with a foot. "It's perfect," she said. "Thank you."

The attendant looked startled. "Do you, er, require anything else?" he said.

"Food and drink, please," Rovan said. "You probably know what's best today."

They splashed around in the bath for a while. The house had provided towels and robes. When they had dried themselves and put the robes on the same attendant arrived with a tray of roast chicken legs, pies, fruit and a pitcher of wine. "They must have spy-holes," Rovan said under his breath.

They ate, sitting on the edge of the bed. The wine was stronger than Senthi would have liked. It made her tipsy and a little silly. Rovan took the cup from her hands. "You shouldn't drink any more of that."

"But you have loads of money."

"Yes, but I don't want to have to carry you. You look heavy." He caught her round the middle and tried to lift her, but they were still sitting down and fell over. Rovan put a hand on Senthi's breast where her robe had fallen open.

"What about the spy-holes?" she asked.

"Never mind the spy-holes. You're beautiful." He ran his hand over her body, thoughtfully, feeling every curve of it. She shivered a little, remembering the last time someone had done that. This was different, though; Rovan wasn't going to do anything she didn't want.

She slid the robe off his shoulders. He had grown tall and would probably become broad when he was older. "Hmm, you've got muscles."

They were both naked now, romping on the huge bed. All thought of spy-holes or Mighty Servants was forgotten. The chicken legs got cold and the wine got warm. They rolled on top of each other, tumbling like kittens.
Without warning, he was inside her. Or she was enveloping him. Their bodies were mingled, their minds touched and overlapped. There was a sharp pain, deeper inside than she'd imagined possible. She shrieked.

He pulled out of her and sat up, spraying all over the bed. "Sorry. Did I hurt you?"

He looked so sheepish that she couldn't help laughing. "Yes, but it doesn't matter. I think it always hurts the first time."

"You mean..." He blushed, most of the way down his chest as well. "It's your first time?"

"Yes, what did you think? That I've been hopping into bed with half the Temple?" She didn't know whether to be amused or flattered or annoyed. "Not that I've been waiting for you specifically, but I didn't have the opportunity, did I? Venla has been watching me like a hawk."

"But..."

"But what?"

"Well." The blush became deeper. "It's my first time too."

"You can't be serious."

"Sure. I thought you'd be experienced, living in Essle and all, and I could learn from you without you noticing."

"I thought you'd be experienced. You're older, and you're out in the world, not locked up with a cranky teacher and in the Temple of Mizran all the time." An uncontrollable fit of giggling bubbled up. She let it out. It was contagious. In no time, they were both laughing as if they wouldn't ever stop.

They had to stop at last, of course, and looked at one another with tears running down their faces. "I don't think we should try to get more experience right now," Senthi said. "I think we need another bath."

"Where is that man when we need him?" Rovan asked. He found a cord that looked like a bell-pull and pulled it. Presently, the attendant appeared.

"Could we have some more hot water, please?"
The attendant emptied the bath through a drain-hole in the floor and brought hot water, and cold, and more towels, and a small linen-wrapped package that he handed to Senthi with a grin.

"Ah, they've been using the spy-hole," she said. "Or he's seen the blood on the sheet."

"What?" Rovan looked completely baffled.

"Blood-rags," Senthi said. "I'm bleeding like I'm having my courses. Come to think of it, I might be getting my courses right now."

There was a different woman at the door, with grey curls and a world-wise grin. She looked sharply at Rovan as he paid. "Would you have a brother called Eldan by any chance?"

"Yes."

"When you see him, tell him he owes five riders and seven shillings."

Rovan nodded solemnly. Senthi suppressed a giggle.

"Good thing you didn't tell her that he's away on the Queen Mialle," she said as they crossed the blue bridge. "She'd have wanted it from you."

"Yes, and I wouldn't have had it. That place was expensive. Eldan could have told me it was a brothel!"

"Well, at least we did the proper thing there," Senthi said, wincing. Walking was harder than she'd expected, and she felt as if everybody could see what had happened to her.
Chapter 10

"Well? Are you going to marry him? That son of Lydan's?"

"Probably."

"Don't think you can go on living here when you do. I suppose you're going to get him into our Guild, at least?"

"Yes. I've introduced him to Athal."

Venla thought for a moment. "Ah, yes, the wine man. That should do for now. You can always take him on yourself later."

"I might. When I'm a master."

Venla snorted. "Not for a long time yet, young lady. Let's get down to work."

Venla's lessons didn't wear Senthí out as much as they had when she had just started. The really exhausting lessons were Faran's now. He was getting her ready to compete in the Town Games. "I'll enter you in the lowest class," he said, "but I think you may well win that and get into the next class as well. You have to work, though."

She worked. Sword-fighting was something she could put all her strength and will into without having to reckon with other people than her opponent. It gave her honest sweat, honest muscle aches, and even a small honest scar where Faran had nicked her wrist when she wasn't paying attention.
Her daily work in the Temple of Mizran, and even Venla's lessons, seemed less important as the Games drew closer. Her life revolved around her sword and Rovan. They went out as often as they could both manage to get away, sometimes to have a drink in an inn, sometimes just to sit on a wall with a loaf of bread and a piece of cheese and talk. They never went back to the bath-house with the blue bridge, though they went to other bath-houses and found many places where they could be unobserved.

Almost too late, Senthi realised that the Games were on Midsummer Day, after the wake for the Feast of Archan. She'd have to fight after a sleepless night. She studied her herbals and came up with a concoction that she could take to stay awake and alert long enough, though she'd need much more sleep afterwards. Well, after the fight she could afford to sleep.

"Remember, no semsin," Faran said. "I know you'll be tempted, and so would I be--so will I be when it's my turn--but at least one of the judges will be from the Order of the Sworn and they'll notice and disqualify you. We don't need that, not you and not the school." They had had to put a lot of work into fighting without semsin; Senthi used it as a matter of course. In her early training Faran had encouraged it: it would give her an edge in a real fight.

The judge from the Order turned out to be Hylse. She smiled at Senthi when she recognised her. The other was a man even taller than Faran, at least seventy years old, but still standing straight. Faran nodded approvingly. "That's my old teacher. Champion for twelve years running when he was younger."

The third class started the tournament. Senthi stood at the sideline, waiting for her name to be called, holding Rovan's hand. She watched the other contestants silently, while Rovan cheered some of them on.

"Arnei Senthi," the old judge said. "Lysei Rhun."

She stood in the sand, finding her place. The person on the other side was doing the same. When she looked up she recognised the young man she'd fought, the one who had killed Ruzyn. "You!"
He grinned. "So we fight again."

She glared at him. "But this time it's a fair fight."

They closed in as soon as Hylse gave the signal. Senthí noticed that Rhun had lost his advantage over her: her training had caught up with his. He was still taller and stronger, but she was faster and her technique was better. She used everything Faran had taught her, using her gifts only to sharpen her senses. That, according to Faran, was not forbidden, though not openly encouraged either.

She spent a long time studying him, trying to find his weaknesses. There was a bad flaw in his defence on the right side. She took advantage of it and sliced a gash in his leather jacket. Hylse called a halt and inspected the spot. There was no blood; even the shirt underneath was still whole. They started again.

He came very close to doing the same to her once or twice, but she kept him at a distance. His sword glittered annoyingly. It glittered with more than reflected sunlight. There was a strange glow about it-- he was using semsin! She didn't want to stop and protest. If she did, he'd have valuable moments to disarm her at least, perhaps incapacitate her, certainly win the fight. She mustn't let him hit her.

It was very hard not resort to semsin herself. Sweat started to run down her neck and into her shirt, and not only from the physical effort. Her world became very small: only their swords and sword-arms mattered.

The flat of his sword came down hard on her wrist and she dropped hers. Her reflexes screamed. Now don't bend forward and pick it up. Keep looking at him. He waited while she flexed and rubbed the wrist, watching her disdainfully.

You're doing well, Faran said from the sidelines. Keep it up. She gave him a quick grin and got back into position.

Rhun's sword was still glittering. She wasn't sure whether he knew that she'd noticed. The slap on her wrist had only hit the cuff of her glove. She had no way to tell if the sword's aura was meant to hurt her, to distract her, or only to make it easier for him to use.
She ignored it. Now that she knew it was there, it didn't bother her so much.

The next hit was hers, close to the slit in his leathers that she'd already made, but deeper this time, breaking the skin. Rhun cried out, but kept fighting. Hylse had to step in and stop him.

"First blood," she said. "By the rules, Senthi wins fairly." She turned to Rhun and spoke under her breath, but loud enough for Senthi to hear. "And I want a word with you."

They cleared the ring for the next pair. Senthi fell into Rovan's and Faran's arms.

"Well done," Faran said and handed her a towel.

Rovan waited until she had wiped her face and neck and then kissed her. "That's some character," he said, "that Rhun. You knew him, didn't you?"

Senthi nodded. "He's the one who killed Ruzyn."

Rovan gasped. "You never told me that."

"No, I didn't. I should really tell you the whole story. But not now, okay?"

Her name was called again. After Rhun, any opponent was easy. Even in the fighter's haze that was now upon her she disarmed the woman opposite her three times in a row: a clear win. Then there was one she hardly saw through the sweat in her eyes, but she had him on the ground clutching a bleeding wrist soon enough. The next one gave up when he saw that he couldn't get through her defences however much he tried. She hadn't realised that that was the last. She'd won the first round.

Rovan and Faran were at her side again to take her out of the crowd. They passed Alaise, arm in arm with a young man Senthi vaguely remembered seeing at the kitchen door. She slapped Senthi on the back, shouting "Hey! Good show!"

Senthi collapsed at the side of the field as soon as she noticed there was a bench behind her. Someone held a large mug of ale out to her, but she pushed it aside. "Water, please." She must have sweated all the
moisture out of her body. When the water arrived it tasted of having been in a cistern for days, but it was wet enough at least.

"You need some water on the outside as well," Rovan said. "You stink like a badger."

They ended up in a small bath-house in a back street that was about the only place in town not full of Town Games people. Senthi leaned back in a tub of hot water and tried to relax. "I think they'll want me back in an hour," she said. She stood up and stretched, wincing as she found yet another tender spot. "And I'll be even stiffer tomorrow."

Faran was back at the ring, Venla with him, dressed like an exotic princess in shimmering layers of petal-thin silk. Senthi didn't get a chance to talk to them, because the other contestants were already waiting to be called. She was one of the first, perhaps because the judges wanted the weaker ones out of the way.

Her opponent was a nervous young man, shying like a colt at her every move. He was good enough for her to have to work, though; she couldn't just hit or disarm him while he was being uncertain. Suddenly it came to her why exactly he shied away from her: this was a journeyman in the Guild of the Nameless.

Good. She could use that. Not with *sem* *sin*, of course, but if she could look as if she was just a little more sure of herself than she actually was, as if she looked down on him... She drew herself up to her full height, still half a head shorter than he was, but it worked. His guard faltered and she hit him on the chest.

He stepped back to the paling, collecting himself. She waited patiently. He took a deep breath and planted his feet firmly in the sand. *Let him come at me, Senthi thought. I'm not the insecure one.*

It took him a long time, but he got up courage and came at her. Senthi parried him easily and got a counter-attack in before he saw it coming. He was getting tired, or frustrated, or just more and more insecure because this little girl, from the other Guild as well, could hold him at bay. She kept looking for weaknesses, but apart from the jitteriness he
didn't show any obvious ones. Venla's iridescent gown appeared briefly in the front row of spectators. *She's watching. I have to do well.*

She started to feel that she had hardly slept and not eaten enough by far. It became harder. Inexplicably, the sun got in her eyes. Her opponent was outmaneuvering her. She tried to circle around him, but he got in the way and pushed her back, back, until there was nothing for it than to slip under his arm and--

*Thwack!* The flat of his sword hit her full on the arm and she had to drop hers. He waited for her to pick it up. As she rose, she saw a slight smile on his face.

They were at it again, both of them slower now, more deliberate. He was very careful, as if he were trying to spare her. *Come on. What are you waiting for?*

A flick of his wrist, and she was staring at a rapidly spreading red stain on the front of her jacket. Her collarbone stung, too.

Hylse stepped into the ring and proclaimed Jernei Tyan the winner. Then she turned to Senthi. "Are you all right?"

"It's only a scratch, I think, just bleeding a bit." She was beginning to feel light-headed. "I'm really all right," she said, but it was only the fact that Hylse held her up that kept her from keeling over.

She sat on the bench as various people helped her take her jacket and shirt off, gave her watered wine to drink, washed and dressed the wound. It was really only a scratch: moving about had made it bleed a lot, but it was no more than an inch long and skin-deep. Tyan came up to her and she tried to get up, but he grasped her hand before she could. "Thank you for a good fight," he said.

"Congratulations on winning." His touch didn't hurt as much as the commander's had, but it was still uncomfortable.

Venla took Senthi home. She rolled into bed and slept for a night and almost a day.

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84
The next evening they had a table in the Crown, the best eating-house in town. Venla took Senthi out to celebrate and couldn't very well not invite Rovan. Many of the patrons were familiar to Senthi from the Temple: wealthy merchants with their clients, some of the higher-placed masters of trade guilds. It was strange to be there as one of them instead of serving them as part of her work. She watched them surreptitiously, hoping no one would recognise her. She didn't dare hide herself when Venla had every intention of showing her off.

"So you're really intending to marry?" Venla asked, as they sat with a cup of wine afterwards.

"Yes," Rovan said. "We don't want to wait too long either. The Feast of Mizran seems like a good time."

"Hmm. And where will you live? I've told Senthi she can't go on living with me once you're married."

"With my father. He's bought a house in Little Islands."

"What about lessons?" Venla was looking at Senthi now.

"I'll still come to your house for lessons, of course."

"Don't you start neglecting your learning when you have babies. Or your sword-fighting either."

Senthi laughed. "We're not going to have any babies just yet. I'm only fifteen, for Mizran's sake!"

"We did wonder whether you would marry us," Rovan said, "but you might think you're too young."

Venla looked at him wryly. "Well," she said, "in fact I do think I'm rather too young, but yes, I will. Neither of you have any old women in the family, have you?"

"Even if I could get hold of my aunt, she's younger than you," Senthi said.

"I don't think I have any women in the family at all any more," Rovan said at the same time.

"There's nothing for it, then. The Feast of Mizran, you said? We'll have to have the dressmaker in again."
Senthi put her foot down about the wedding gown. Venla wanted it to be bright red, flame-red, but Senthi knew that that would eclipse her. Red, yes, if Venla insisted, but a red as dark as old wine, set off with silver. They had a doublet made for Rovan of the same material.

Venla was restless, pacing about in the house. She was distracted at lessons, though Senthi worked as hard as ever, perhaps even harder to compensate. "What's the matter?" Senthi asked at last.

"If I hadn't been drunk with your victory," Venla said, "I'd have kept you here for another year at least. I'd have made you a master myself."

"You can make me a master regardless. I'm still apprenticed to you. I don't have to live here for that, do I?"

"It will be different. You'll have your own life."

"I have my own life now," Senthi said, knowing the same instant that it wasn't entirely true. Ever since Ruzyn had carried her into Venla's house, her life had been partly Venla's.

Venla sighed. "Child," she said, "you don't know how lonely it is to be a grand master."

"I'll have to learn, won't I?"

"Yes." The lesson went on, less uneasily than before, but with a shadow on it all the same.

Faran, bless him, worked her just as hard but without asking questions or being uneasy. They'd picked apart all of her fights, starting with remembering in ever greater detail exactly what she'd done and what the other person had done, then going through the movements with Faran standing in for the opponent. Then they did it in reverse, Faran taking Senthi's part and Senthi acting as her own opponent. She saw all her mistakes in relentless detail and Faran made her work out by herself how to correct them. It took them weeks of daily sessions.

"Second class next year," he said when they were done.

"And first class the year after that?"
"If you go on learning as fast as this, yes. And if you're not pregnant by that time, of course. It's certainly possible to wield a sword when you are, but it does strange things to your balance. And you won't want to put yourself into too much danger either."

"The Town Games aren't that dangerous," Senthí said, sheathing the sword she'd been polishing. Faran said nothing, but pulled down the top of his hose and showed a barely healed gash in his hip.

"That happened in the Games?"

"First class is until you can't fight any more or give up," he said. "I'm not one to give up. I had to, with this. I came second, though."

She knew he had come second --she'd bought him a flask of wine to celebrate-- but this she hadn't known. "I see."
Chapter 11

Senthí was packing. In the three and a half years she’d spent in Venla's house she had accumulated an astonishing number of things that she didn't want to part with. Clothes, papers, a few books. The silver wine cup she’d won in the Town Games. People in the Temple who knew she was about to get married gave her sheets and towels and kitchenware, in spite of her protests that they were going to live with Rovan's father and he already had everything.

Alaise helped her, as excited as if she were the one getting married. "I wish I could come and work for you," she said.

"Why can't you? We'll need an experienced maid." Senthí grinned. "I think I can afford you."

"Venla wouldn't like it."

"That's a good point. Shall I talk to her?"

"Well..."

Senthí went to talk to Venla. It was harder than she'd thought. Alaise had been with Venla since she was eleven. "I need someone with experience," Senthí said. "I don't know how to train a maid of my own. You do."

"I have better things to do."

"Halla can train a new maid. She'll enjoy that."

"Hm. I won't need two maids anyway with you gone."
"So I can take her on?"

"As long as you lend her to me for Guild meetings." She didn't say that Senthi would soon be hosting Guild meetings of her own, but they both knew it.

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Senthi and Rovan went to the Temple of Mizran on the Feast in their wedding clothes, Senthi wearing her surcoat over the wine-red gown. They had to stand apart in the service because Rovan didn't have any position in the Temple. As soon as it was over they took Venla to one of their favourite places in a little boat. It was a stand of willows on a river-arm on the north side of town, practically in the swamp, so secluded that you'd almost believe that Essle was far away.

Venla joined their hands and poured the water over as they said their vows. They didn't let go of each other until at least one of them needed both hands to row back to Rovan's house --their house-- where the guests were waiting. Half the Guild was there, and most of Senthi's colleagues from the Temple, and several of Lydan's business partners, and their wives and husbands and children. Alaise, glowing with importance, bustled about directing a bevy of maids and serving-boys borrowed from friends and neighbours.

Lydan came to stand next to Senthi, looking younger than she'd ever seen him. "My boy has made a good catch."

She smiled at him. "Thank you."

"I wish Eldan was here, though."

"Yes." The Queen Mialle had been away for just over a year. There could be no news yet. Any word they sent had to come back by ship as well.

You never paid Eldan's five and seven, did you? she asked Rovan in her mind.

Of course not. Let them get it from him with interest when he comes back rich.
There was more food and drink, people coming up to them to say a few words, someone playing the viol, Aine's little Radan falling over his own feet when he tried to dance. It should have been perfect, but something was gnawing at the edges of Senthi's mind, something that she couldn't see clearly with so many people around. She excused herself and went in the direction of the privy, but stayed in the yard and looked around with all her senses.

She was being watched. No, the house was being watched. The enemy were obviously curious what so many people of the Guild of Archan were doing in one place. *We're celebrating a wedding,* she thought at them defiantly. *My wedding. Our lot get married just like yours do.* She threw stronger protection around the house, on top of the cursory wards that she routinely put on any place that was hers. *See it, don't you? I don't care.*

"But I do care," she said to Rovan when he joined her in the yard. "I don't want to have to be on guard at our wedding."

"Shall we ask Venla to do the protection?"

She shrugged. "I'd be on guard anyway. And we know they're there now, they've spoiled it already." She felt the familiar anger rise, a surge of power that made her tense her shoulders and breathe more deeply.

Rovan recognised it. "Don't let's fight now," he said.

They went back inside, reluctantly. Aine made a questioning face when she saw them. *We're being watched,* Senthi said to her in her mind. *The Guild of the Nameless.*

*Do we fight?*

*Not until they do. But let's prepare.*

Rovan talked to his father. Lydan tactfully suggested left and right that the young couple would perhaps want some time alone. People started to leave. After a while, only the gifted were still there, apart from Lydan himself.

"Do you want me out of the house as well?" he asked.
"We can't very well send you away," Rovan said. "Besides, we need someone to call the doctor if anybody gets wounded."

"Hey," Aine said. "I am the doctor."

"Yes, but what if it's you who is wounded?"

Lydan stayed. He sent Alaise and the hired servants with most of the children to the house of one of his business associates. "The housekeeper is in the Guild, she can protect you," he said. "I'll write you a note."

Rovan was as white as a sheet. "Senthí," he said.

"Hm?"

"I think this is my fight."

"Your fight? But you're still an app-- Oh. I see."

She went to warn the others while Rovan sat on the edge of the bed, collecting himself. "Couldn't they have waited?" Aine fumed. "Don't they know it's his wedding day? Apprentices don't spoil that easily."

"Perhaps theirs do," Athal said. He was pacing up and down the room, looking almost as nervous as Rovan. "I wonder who it is."

"Do you know any of their apprentices?" Senthí asked.

"I'll probably know the master. Rovan will have to have two people to stand by him-- you and me, I suppose."

"Do we have to do anything? Fight the other person's seconds?"

"Only if someone cheats," Athal said. "We don't. And they don't. I hope."

Rovan came out of the bedroom, still looking pale and tense. "If I don't go now I'll never go," he said.

Athal and Senthí went with him, out of the house and over the footbridge. Little Islands was all bridges and walkways, with most houses facing the water and the back yards touching or separated by gardens. Lydan's house and the other four houses on the island shared a five-sided kitchen garden.

They noticed, when they were on the bridge, that those of the Nameless were behind the house. They must have come through the alley
on the other side unless Lydan had neighbours who were in the Guild of
the Nameless, but Rovan would surely have known that.

"They're in the herb patch," Rovan said. "I hope they don't trample the
parsley."

"You won't be fighting with swords, I think," Athal said. "Not much
trampling. Let's go back."

There were two men, one elderly and the other much younger. Senthi
was shocked to recognise Jernei Tyan, who had beaten her at the Games.
They had a girl with them who looked about twelve, but must be fourteen
or fifteen by the way she moved. She had a strong look of Tyan. His
sister, probably. The apprentice.

She appeared to be unarmed. So did the older man. Tyan was wearing
a sword, as was Senthi. Athal had a dagger. Rovan must have a dagger in
his boot, if he hadn't left it in the bedroom.

"Is it really necessary," Athal said, "to make a man take his
journeyman's trial on his wedding day?"

The old man looked taken aback. "I-- I'm sorry. I didn't know that the
bridegroom was the candidate. It looked like a large gathering of-- of you,
and it seemed a perfect opportunity." He put his hand on the girl's
shoulder; she nodded. "We're perfectly willing to put this off until
tomorrow or the day after."

"Well, that's--" Athal began, but Venla, leaning out of an upstairs
window, interrupted him. "Perain, you've challenged us," she called to the
old man. "They fight. Today."

Athal's expression changed from relief to something very close to
despair. He gave a helpless shrug. The two masters walked to the middle
of the garden and stood facing each other, as if they were having a
staring contest. After a while, they appeared to come to a silent accord
and parted. Athal turned to Senthi. "You ward our side," he said. "You're
the strongest. Perain will do theirs himself."

Perain met Senthi at the edge of the garden, right on top of the
parsley, but that couldn't be helped now. She met his right hand with her
left. She'd never learned this, but it came as naturally as if she'd been doing it all her life.

They turned back to back and each walked their half of the perimeter of a circle, pushing at the air with their outstretched hands. A broad line of light hung at shoulder height, almost invisible unless you knew how to look. Senthi heard a gasp from Rovan and barely kept herself from gasping as well: she'd never seen protection look so solid. It must be Perain's presence, or the formality of the trial.

They met again on the other side. Perain touched Senthi's hand and both hands dropped, leaving the shimmering circle hanging in the air.

Rovan and the girl took a step forward. "Leave your weapons with your seconds," Perain said. Rovan tossed his sheathed dagger to Senthi. The girl unbuckled a sheath from inside her sleeve and gave it to Tyan.

Perain nodded almost imperceptibly to Athal. "You can begin," Athal said. "Remember, it is not to win, but to achieve."

At first it really was a staring contest. Senthi could see force going back and forth between the two, making ripples in the air like the hot sun on paving stones. Sweat ran down Rovan's neck and stained first his shirt, then his wedding doublet. *He should have taken it off,* Senthi thought.

Rovan was the first to move. He drew daggers made of light out of the air, one in each hand. The girl did the same. They feinted at one another, thrust and parried, moved forward and back. It was not exactly like a real fight: Senthi could see that neither of them had any experience in fighting with real weapons. They looked like children playing at fencing, except that this was dead serious.

The girl lost her daggers in the middle of a movement, or perhaps she made them disappear. She stood very still, her hands pointing to the ground at an angle. It had become a contest of wills again. Rovan kept moving, also with empty hands now. He went around her, spinning an ever closer circle of force around her. Senthi suddenly realised what he was doing: they'd practised this. The girl tried and failed to prevent herself from being enclosed. She was immobilised. She sat on her haunches, arms around her knees. There was no room for anything else.
Rovan took a deep breath and stood upright with his arms folded over his chest, exhausted, dripping with sweat, but triumphant. He had passed the test.

Athal came and slapped him on the back, and so, after some hesitation, did Perain. The girl still sat in her enclosure, visibly fuming. From where Senthi stood, she could almost feel the power that flowed around her. Tyan was watching her too, fascinated.

The shell of force broke. The girl was free, but didn't get up: she collapsed at Tyan's feet. He caught her under the arms and helped her to stand. Exhausted as she was, she stretched, shook out her stiff arms and legs and hurled herself at Rovan, only to be held back by Perain's outstretched arm.

"Take it easy, Alaise. You've both made it."

Senthi laughed. The girl called Alaise turned to her, looking indignant. "What are you laughing at?"

"My maid's name is Alaise as well."

"Well, I'm nobody's maid." She let Tyan support her again, suddenly very small and tired.

Senthi embraced Rovan and he held her as if he'd never let her go.

Lydan came out of the house and invited them all in. "It doesn't matter that you're the enemy," he said to Perain. "It's still a wedding. Come in and rest and have something to eat and drink."

They did that, Perain and Venla looking daggers at each other, but nobody dared pick a fight.

Later, in the bath, Rovan told Senthi his version of the fight. "She was very strong," he said. "As strong as you are. Well, almost. I couldn't have wrapped her up if she'd been a journeyman already."

"And those daggers?"

"Well, I had to have something to threaten her with to get her moving. I couldn't have done it if we'd just stood there. I can't wrap if I can't reach."
"I'll teach you." She scrubbed his back and he rubbed against her like a cat, almost purring. "But not now."

She took off her shift, the only thing she was still wearing, and joined him in the water.
Chapter 12

Senthi wiped her pen and put it down, sanded the document and shook it off, and looked up at Athal, who was standing in front of her desk. "Twelve casks of best red Ryshas, three to be delivered to the Temple before each quarter-day." She smiled at him. "That I happen to be married to your apprentice doesn't get you a better price." She handed the paper to the schoolboy who appeared at her elbow. "Two copies, please, and bring them back to me for sealing."

As soon as the boy left she put protection on the door. Athal looked worried. "Oh, I trust you," Senthi said. "It's just that I don't want people to come barging in for a while. Can I talk to you?"

Athal sat down. "Guild business?"

"Yes. About Rovan's trial. Is it usual that it's so formal?"

"This is one of the accepted forms, yes. It's useful to have the formal structure if you want a fight and you don't want people killed."

"Was it arranged? In advance, I mean?"

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Did you and Perain arrange for Rovan and that Alaise to fight?"

"No, not at all. They showed up, and it was clear that they had a candidate and we had a candidate. Perain knows the formalities, and, well, it was my first time but I think it went rather well."
Senthi mused about that for a while. "Are fights for trials ever arranged?"

"I don't know. I've never seen one that was."

There was a knock at the door and Senthi let the young clerk in. She scanned the copies for obvious mistakes, sealed all three papers, and gave one to Athal.

"I see you have a seal of your own these days," he said.

"Well, it's still a Temple seal, but I keep it on my belt for safety."

"Sleeves next year?"

"This year, I've heard whisper."

Athal left with his papers, leaving Senthi to ponder what he'd said. She closed and protected the door again, after telling the clerk that she was not to be disturbed.

So arranging fights was not the usual way to go about it. And yet Venla had told her she'd arranged one for her. Hylse of the Order would be the person to know. If it turned out that Venla had arranged the fight, but with Rhun instead of someone of the Guild of the Nameless, she'd have to speak to Venla about it. But not right away. First, I want to learn everything I can from her.

There were very few grand masters of their Guild: only one in Essle and perhaps four in the whole country. If Venla turned her out --which she could expect if she confronted Venla with this-- she'd either have to learn everything by herself or travel a long way to find another master. Not that she didn't want to go to Veray or Ildis eventually, but this didn't seem to be the time for it. The Queen Mialle was expected back any time now.

She went to the Order house after work and boldly knocked on the door. A young journeyman opened it.

"I'd like to speak to Master Hylse," she said.

"Er-- wait here." The boy disappeared, closing the door on her. Understandable: she wouldn't let someone from the Guild of the Nameless in her house just like that either. All the same, it was annoying.
He came back after a while and took her to the commander's office. Hylse sat at the commander's desk; he wasn't there himself, at least not in sight. "Thank you, Arin," Hylse said. She pointed to the chair behind Senthi. "Sit down, please."

She sat. The room was as full of papers as the first time she'd been here, but there seemed to be slightly more order in them. Hylse waited patiently until Senthi spoke, hands folded in front of her.

"I've come to you because I think you might know something that I'm wondering about," Senthi said. Come to the point, she told herself. "My husband had his journeyman's trial some time ago. He fought one of yours."

"Alaise. I know."

"I wondered-- the point is, at my trial, my teacher told me she'd arranged a fight for me with someone of your Guild. Would that have been the same kind of thing if it had gone as she intended?"

Hylse's eyebrows went up almost imperceptibly. She was silent for a long time before she answered. "I have never heard of an arranged fight between your apprentices and ours," she said. "If a fight takes place it's usually regulated, like your husband's, but we don't arrange it in advance."

Senthi felt the blood rising in her cheeks. She'd been right. "Could it be the case that Venla planned for Rhun to be there so I could fight him?"

"Knowing Venla, I'd say she was capable of that."

Senthi nodded. "Thank you."

Rovan was already home, sorting samples of fabric on the dinner table. She told him what Athal and Hylse had said. "Yes, you're right," he said. "Venla will have to know about it, but I think you shouldn't tell her until you're a master. She'd kill you."

"Try to kill me at least. And if we fight, either she kills me or I kill her, and neither of us should be dead right now."

"Do you think you're strong enough to kill Venla yet?"

"I know most of her weaknesses. And--"
“What?"  

“I have a reason to stay alive. I think I might be pregnant."  

She wasn't, as it turned out, but the possibility had made them think. If --when-- she had a baby, Venla probably wouldn't want to teach her any more. Senthi didn't know how close she was to being a master, and she couldn't very well ask Venla outright: she knew she wouldn't get an answer that was any use. She pushed harder every time in her lessons, trying to gauge just how far she could go by herself, and how far Venla would let her go. She suspected that Venla had been testing her, thinking that Senthi wouldn't notice.  

All right. When she has to do that every time, then I'll be ready.  

By Midsummer Senthi was sure she could force Venla into having her take a master's trial. She didn't pursue the matter: not only was there much more she wanted to learn from Venla, there were the Town Games first. She needed all her attention and energy for the training. She excused herself from the Midsummer party early, almost the instant she'd lit the fire, and got a few hours of sleep so that she'd at least be awake. Good thing that she was in the second class this year and didn't have to appear first thing in the morning.  

Rhun was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they'd barred him after last year, or he'd decided by himself not to enter. Strange, she'd never heard what had become of him.  

Tyan was there, with his pesky sister. He won his first round easily. Senthi didn't see what he did in the second, because she was fighting someone else herself, a woman twice her age and half a head shorter. "It's my own fault I'm in the second class," she said with a wry grin. "I was in the first for years, but I've let myself go. Happens when you have babies."  

"Hmm," Senthi said. This woman was really good. It was a strange experience to fight someone shorter than herself: she'd always been the small one in any fight. She had no time to pick up tricks, though. I'll have to ask her to teach me.
She was disarmed and stood still for a moment, panting. The sun got in her eyes. She turned around, lost her balance, tried to keep from falling and realised that she was light-headed. She sat down on the sand with a thud.

"Are you all right?" Her opponent helped her up. "You're positively green."

"I just felt faint for a moment." She still felt faint. Her knees gave way again. People tried to come and help her, but the small woman brushed them all away and got Senthi to the bench on the side.

"I should probably give up and go home," Senthi said.

"Can you manage?"

"Yes, my husband is here." Rovan had pushed through the crowd and put an arm around Senthi protectively. Faran was also there, with a worried look on his face. "What happened?"

"Nothing-- I was light-headed." Suddenly, it dawned on Senthi what was probably the matter. "I think I ought to see the midwife."

This time she really was pregnant. Thinking back, she could remember missing her courses twice, perhaps three times. The midwife seemed scatterbrained, but the way she examined Senthi's still almost flat belly marked her as an expert.

"I'm not gifted myself, mind," she said. "My apprentice is, though. Now where is that girl? Oh yes, I let her go to the Games, her brother is competing. Never mind, you'll do. A bit young, but you're a good strong girl. Wide enough in the hips as well. You'll want to come back when you start showing and have the girl tell you how to look at the brat for yourself."

"If you're not gifted, how do you know I am?"

"Ah, you're Venla's apprentice, aren't you? Everybody knows Venla. She'd hardly take an apprentice who wasn't."

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100
"It suits you," Faran said, "the different balance. You're standing much more upright."

"I have to," Senthi said with a laugh. "If I don't I either fall over or get a backache."

She was visibly pregnant now; she'd had Alaise put panels in all her clothes. For sword training she wore an old shirt of Lydan's as a smock. Her balance hadn't changed all that much yet, but it felt as if it had. There were odd pulls in all the muscles that were anywhere in the relevant part of her body.

"How long until I'm back in form when I've had the baby?" she asked.

"Months, if you start training again as soon as you can stand on your feet," Faran said. "You won't be back in the Games next year, but probably the year after if you don't have another one right away. Years if you sit at home with the baby until it's big enough to lift a sword by itself."

The tailor grumbled at her changed shape when she went to be measured for the sleeves that would turn her surcoat into a robe. "What difference does it make?" she asked. "It's not supposed to close in front anyway."

"Yes, but the shape," the tailor said. "It's not becoming. I can make alterations."

"It's temporary. I don't want it altered now and altered right back next year."

He grumbled some more, but only made the sleeves and didn't try to convince her. Perhaps he'd seen too many pregnant priestesses in his life.

She never went back to the midwife to have the apprentice show her how to see the child. She found out all by herself, by accident, in a lesson with Venla. It was a lesson to control the functions of her body. While she was going deeper into herself she touched a small spark of life, a tentative consciousness that wasn't hers and yet belonged to her. She tried to draw its attention, but it was still wrapped up in itself, too little to communicate.

"You can be broody at home," Venla said. "Here, we work."

101
There was still no news of the Queen Mialle. Rovan and his father were doing a brisk trade in silks. Lydan had bought a share in a ship on Senthí’s recommendation and it had come in with a full load. They weren’t as rich yet as they would be when the Queen Mialle came in, but rich enough. "We ought to have a real trading-house!" Rovan said. "Lydan and Sons."

"And grandson as well," Senthí said.

"How do you know it’s a boy?

"Look." She took his hand and put it on the bulge of her body, leading his mind in. The little presence was more definite now, and quite definitely male. "We’ll only have to think of one name."

Senthí felt very strange standing among the acolytes dressed in only her maternity smock. Not that it wasn’t an exquisite silk maternity smock, made of ends of bolts that Lydan and Rovan had sold in pieces, but it still felt bare. When she went to receive her robe from the Mighty Servant, he hardly looked at her except to put it around her shoulders, leaving her to stick her arms in the sleeves herself.

"He didn’t even recognise me this time," she said to Rovan when they were out of the crowd. "I think I’ve turned into a matron. If we ever have any daughters we’ll have to keep them out of his sight, though."

She took Rovan to her office and poured him a cup of wine. "Athal’s. I told him not to expect a special price because I’m married to you. You drink it, I don’t want to get little Aidan drunk before he’s even born."

"Mmm, it’s good. Shall we go to Veray when the Queen Mialle is in, to the wine fair?"

"And taste some of this before it’s been travelling, you mean? Good idea."
The Queen Mialle didn't come back that autumn, nor the next winter. There were rumours that she had been sunk by pirates off the coast of Idanyas, or even by the people of Idanyas themselves. After all, though Idanyas was nominally part of the kingdom, the people there kept so much to themselves that it might as well be another country. And they did have all the best shipwrights. The Pride of Selday that lay in port was proof of that, large and sleek, with four masts and countless red sails.

Senthi sent a messenger to Idanyas, privately, to find out whether anyone in Selday or Dol-Rayen knew anything about the Queen Mialle. It wasn't only Eldan, or Lydan's money, or her own sixty riders that she was concerned about. If the best ship in the fleet could disappear just like that, without even news about what had happened to it, something must be very wrong.

The messenger was back within weeks. "They didn't even let me in," he said. "I got off the ship at Selday and they put me in the lockup until there was a ship going back. The whole place belongs to the Nameless."

"Selday does?"

"All of Idanyas. They don't let us in. They told me I was lucky to escape a whipping." The boy --it was one of the students from the trade school-- was sweating with apprehension and his voice got higher with every sentence. "At least they believed me when I said I didn't know."

Senthi shifted in her chair. She was uncomfortably large these days. "I'll send someone who isn't gifted, then." She paid him the whole fee. "It's not your fault. I might need you again."

"Thank you, mistress." Mistress. "Not yet," she said. "'Senthi' will do."

The baby kicked hard against her ribs and she got up awkwardly. When she started to walk to the door a stream of something warm ran down her leg. She stood still, gripping the table, as her whole body tightened and relaxed again.

She called the boy back. "Find someone to take me home. And call the midwife. Rusla in Old Fish Street." Rovan will know. The same moment she heard Rovan's voice in her mind: I'm coming.
They reached the house all at once. The midwife had a girl with her, apparently her apprentice. She looked familiar. She was very gifted, and very much of the Nameless.

"You're Alaise!" Senthi exclaimed.

The girl scowled. "I never gave you my name."

"Well, you can have mine, in case you need something to curse me by. I'm Senthi."

The midwife herded Alaise into the house before they could start arguing in earnest.

"Shall I send her away?" Rovan asked. "The apprentice, I mean."

Senthi shook her head. "She'll behave. She's working. Rusla would never stand for it if she didn't."

She turned out to be right. Alaise knew what she was doing. By the time Senthi needed a hand to hold on to at all times, the hand was hers as often as Rovan's.

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She didn't remember much, later. She lay with her son on her stomach, more exhausted than she'd ever been, even when she'd just arrived in Venla's house. Rovan sat next to her, looking almost as tired as she felt.

"He's beautiful," he said.

"He's red and wrinkled," said Alaise, who was filling a large bowl with water. "And bloody all over. We'll clean you both up."

Everything conspired to make Senthi drowsy. With the baby suckling peacefully at her breast, she fell asleep.
"Great goddess Timoine," Senthi said, holding her son up to the east, "this is the child Aidan whom we have brought forth."

The baby looked surprised, but from what she'd seen so far that seemed to be normal for babies. Senthi called on the other gods, facing south, west and north in turn, and handed Aidan to Rovan. He bawled.

"It's you he wants," Rovan said.

"Hungry." She went into the house to find a place to sit.

The next day she put Aidan in a basket and went to Faran's fencing school. "I'm back," she said. "We had the name-giving yesterday. I can stand up." Not for very long, but Faran didn't have to know that. She'd manage.

"We'll just have some limbering-up exercises to start with," Faran said. "Your balance has changed again." He looked at the sleeping baby in the basket. "How old is he?"

"Six days."

He laughed. "Too young to learn anything yet, then."

She did manage. Getting back into shape turned out to be a matter of weeks rather than months. She carried Aidan everywhere, to fencing class, to Venla's house and to the Temple. People got used to the basket slung around her shoulder. Aine also had a new baby, a delicate little girl very different from the sturdy Aidan. They went to the bath-house
together, holding the babies to float and splash in the warm water while they talked. It wasn't only baby matters they talked about, but Guild matters as well.

"That Alaise," Senthi said. "Rovan fought her, remember? He said she's as strong as I am."

"She is," Aine said. "She's their great hope. They don't have any grand masters in Essle at the moment. Perain is trying to teach her."

"Do you think I might have to fight her for my master's trial?"

"Unlikely. You're almost ready and she's only been a journeyman for less than a year."

"Good," Senthi said with a relieved sigh. "I think I could like her. I'd have a hard time killing her."

"That might go both ways," Aine said, "seeing that she's a midwife. They don't like to take life, even in a fight. Doctors, too." She grinned. "Doesn't keep me from fighting, though, I know some very interesting ways to knock people out."

"Teach me?"

"Sure."

Some of the very interesting ways to knock people out Venla probably didn't know or thought beneath her. It was useful to have a doctor for a friend, someone who knew at least as much about bodies as Venla knew about minds. And Aine knew a thing or two about minds as well.

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Senthi sent Athal's cousin Vauri to Idanyas. She wasn't in the Guild, though she had a trace of a gift: she had a good idea whether people were speaking the truth, as long as she didn't try to see it deliberately. She would go as a wine merchant's representative, carrying samples from Athal.

"You can draw on the Temple for expenses," Senthi said, "but I'll give you some money in hand just in case the Temples in Idanyas don't want to recognise my seal."
"What if they get suspicious?"

"As long as you're not too heavy-handed, they won't. And if they do, silver solves most problems." She handed Vauri a heavy purse. "I've paid your passage on the Black Swan. She sails tomorrow."

It was out of her hands again. She tended to be less worried when she was actually doing something about things, and more worried when she had to wait.

At least there was one thing she could do something about. She left Aidan with Alaise and went to see Venla.

"Were you having a lesson today?" Venla asked. "I don't think so."

"There's something I need to talk to you about."

"All right, then. What is it?"

"You told me that you'd arranged a fight for my journeyman's trial."

"Good grief, that's years ago. But yes, I did."

"But you didn't arrange a fight with the servants of the Nameless. You arranged the fight with Rhun."

It was spot on. Venla turned pale. "Who told you that?"

"Hylse of the Order."

"She had no right to--"

"I went and asked her. Right after Rovan's trial."

"Why did you keep that from me so long?"

"I'm not required to tell you exactly who I talk to and what I talk about," Senthí said, drawing herself up to her full height. She still wasn't as tall as Venla, and probably would never be, but it made her feel impressive. "In fact, I'm not required to answer to you for anything any more. I'm practically your equal now."

Venla seemed to grow taller still. "Prove it."

"All right." She looked at Venla expectantly. "Well? I don't want to fight you. One of us might get killed and we don't have too many grand masters as it is. You told me that yourself." Anger rose, but Venla had taught her well. She could control it.
"Your first lesson was to leave this room," Venla said. "Let your last lesson be to leave this house. You may use anything you have. So will I."

Senthí nodded. It seemed fitting.

"But first," Venla said, "one last thing." Senthí felt Venla's touch in her mind, stronger than it had ever been before. When Venla retreated there was something still there, like a stamp.

"What is it?" Senthí asked.

"I can kill you with that," Venla said. "Or rather, command you to kill yourself. All masters have it."

"You too?"

Venla snorted and left. Senthí sat in the workroom, baffled. She tried to find out what exactly it was that Venla had left in her mind, worrying at it like a dog with a rat, but all she succeeded in was to make it itch. She shook her head, but the itchy feeling didn't go away.

Leave the house, Venla had said. It seemed too easy. There must be some catch.

She looked around her. The workroom looked perfectly ordinary. She'd been having lessons here every day for years, and two or three lessons a week since her marriage. Even if Venla had locked her in it should be easy enough to get out. She opened the door.

Outside it didn't look like the hallway. In fact it looked like the workroom again. She stepped through the door and closed it behind her. It disappeared.

So it's not the real house. It's an image of the house. She tried it with her eyes closed. Sure enough, there was the hallway on the other side of the door. She could feel the panelling. This door, too, disappeared when she had gone through and closed it.

She sat down on the floor without opening her eyes. She must still be in the house; the real house at that. There were no other people there that she could sense. Venla must either have locked her in completely or taken Halla and the cook with her when she left. She felt her way along the walls. The panelling was unbroken, without any doors at all. I'm in
Venla's trap all right. Moreover, she suspected that Venla had prepared the trap a long time ago, to spring it on her when the time came.

What was below? Floorboards, beams, earth. Water, probably, if this was the real hallway. She reached out with her mind. Wood, air. She couldn't do much with those. Mud. That was mostly earth, and she'd probably be able to draw strength from it if she ran out of resources.

She opened her eyes. The hallway was there, the same size and shape as it was in the real house, but without the doors. Still an image. The doors must be there. She put her hands on the wood where the front door ought to be. In my first lesson it was paint. Now, obviously, it's veneer. The wood seemed less solid at once: only a thin layer over something more real. Fire will do it. She cupped her hand and made a small flame appear, hot enough though it didn't burn her. She held the flame to the surface where the door-knob should be, willing it against the wood. Scorch marks started to appear and there was a smell like boiling glue. Veneer, indeed.

The door-knob was free now, with the lock under it. She put out the fire hurriedly, before it burned the real door. Or her hands, for that matter: she was getting tired. So, it appeared, was Venla's illusion. As soon as Senthi stopped the burning the whole veneer layer faded away, leaving the slightly scorched wooden door.

Locked, of course.

She'd practised with locks, secretly, on her own and with one of Aine's patients who was a retired locksmith or a retired burglar or both; he'd never told her which. He couldn't work locks with his mind himself, but he knew everything about the insides of locks and he'd given her lockpicking lessons. She'd never been able to practise with this lock, though: Venla would have noticed.

She explored the works of the lock and found the pins that held it shut. Now lift them one by one. Venla had left no spare anea anywhere inside her trap. She braced herself, drawing power from the earth under the floor, though that was very hard because she couldn't touch it.
The first pin was easy enough. It took a lot out of her, but there was no real difficulty in finding or lifting it. The second was harder: she had to keep the first one up at the same time. She made a small illusory wire to hold the pins in place and tried to convince them that it was solid. *I'm not a smith, confound it.* The pins stayed up. Now the third and the fourth. She wrapped her mind around both pins and tried to lift them. They didn't budge; they could have weighed a hundred pounds. *You can't be that heavy. Come on.* The pins quavered and lifted reluctantly.

The lock was open.

It was dark outside. She thought at first that it was another of Venla's illusions, but it was really night. She lit another flame in her hand to have light to see by. She was drained, confused, triumphant, and strangely disappointed all at once. It ought to have been dangerous. It had only been difficult and exhausting. *Gods, giving birth is more dangerous than this.*

Venla was standing on the bridge, and she had Perain and Alaise with her. "You can put that out," she said. "No need to show off." She unhooded the lantern she was carrying. "Now we'll celebrate."

"You can all come to my house to celebrate," Senthi said. Her breasts were aching; they must have been for hours, but she hadn't noticed until now. Milk stained the front of her shirt. "I have a child at home who must be screaming with hunger."

She was right: he was. Lydan looked worried, Rovan very worried. She attended to the baby first, with Rovan hovering anxiously over her.

"You've changed," he said. "It's changed you."

"I'm a master now. Didn't you expect me to change?"

"I don't think it's only that. You're more ... ruthless, I think. You don't have anything holding you back now."

"Venla isn't holding me back any more. Not that she's been able to for months, except that I let her."

"Are you sure she won't try to spring anything else on you?"

"No." There was the mark. "No, not sure at all."
Venla, Perain and Alaise were sitting with Lydan, drinking wine. Only Alaise looked ill at ease. Perhaps Perain made a habit of drinking in the enemy's house.

Senthi sat down, the sleeping Aidan against her shoulder. "I haven't congratulated you yet," Perain said. "Honoured to have you as an adversary."

"Thank you. I think I can say the same."

They sat talking about nothing in particular for a while. Finally Perain and Alaise got up to leave, and so did Venla. "Venla," Senthi said.

"Yes?"

"Do you have my ribbon, or do I have to go to the weaver?"

"I have it."

Senthi held out her hand.

"I'll keep it," Venla said.

"It's mine. Give it to me."

"I'm your master."

"Not any more. I'm my own master now."

"I taught you for five years. You will serve me for five years."

They didn't raise their voices. Both of them sounded entirely reasonable. Perain and Alaise watched the exchange with rising alarm in their faces. Senthi saw Alaise touch Perain's hand, clearly to ask him something surreptitiously.

"In that case," Senthi said, "you don't leave my house until you've given me what is rightfully mine. Perain, Alaise, go home by all means, this is not your business."

They hesitated. Rovan gently shooed them out of the door. Venla stood in the middle of the room, collecting anea around her.

"Do you want to fight me now?" Senthi asked. "In my own house? Do you really want to risk having only one grand master in Essle, either weakened or inexperienced, depending on which of us wins?" She put the
strongest protection she could manage on the house and felt Rovan doing the same.

"You can prevent that by serving me for five years. It's all I ask."

"All I ask is that you give me the ribbon that was made for me, with part of my essence. You can't even use it." Venla must have ordered it from the weaver when it was clear that it couldn't be long until her trial. Senthi hadn't even noticed either Venla or the weaver taking a bit of her anie, though it must be in the ribbon.

"I can." Venla's hand went to the purse hanging from her girdle. Senthi felt a pull at her mind, hard to resist. She resisted. The pull became stronger.

"You don't!" Rovan jumped at Venla but hit some invisible barrier. He sat down hard.

Venla smiled. "No, you don't."

Senthi couldn't stand it any longer. She gathered all her pent-up anger in one bunch and held Venla with it. She knew she was too exhausted to keep that up for long, but it would be enough. While Venla stood fuming, unable to do anything, Senthi calmly took the ribbon from the purse and put it in her bodice.

She released Venla, keeping only one strand of control. "Thank you. You can go." She let go of the last strand.

For one terrible moment it looked as if Venla would unleash all the force of her mind on Senthi. Then she turned and walked to the door. Senthi and Rovan lifted the protection just after Venla tried to open it.
Chapter 14

"She sank," Senthi said, pacing around the dining-room table and looking at each of the five people who sat at it in turn, though most of them knew it already. "She sank. Eight miles off the coast of Idanyas. They could practically see it from Dol-Rayen. Four of the twenty-seven people aboard were rescued. One was imprisoned for being in the wrong guild by Idanyan standards, two died of their wounds before they reached the shore, and the last one is --er-- 'convalescent' and Vauri wasn't allowed to speak to him."

"I did speak to him, though," Vauri said.

"We'll come to that presently. This last one is Serlei Eldan."

"My son," Lydan said at the same time that Rovan said "My brother".

"Yes. It turns out that there's nothing much wrong with him any more, and he's also being held captive."

"I thought your other son wasn't gifted?" Airath asked. He was the only one from the Temple of Mizran present, apart from Senthi herself.

"He wasn't when he left," Lydan said. "They may just have thrown him in with Jichan because they were the only two they got to shore alive."

"All the same, they oughtn't to keep either of them prisoner." Senthi noticed that she was still pacing and sat down between Airath and Rovan. Aidan crawled out from under the table and climbed into her lap.

"They don't take bribes either," Vauri said.
Airath lifted an eyebrow. "How much did you offer them?"

"I didn't actually offer them anything, I made friends with someone in the Order of the Sworn, or what they have for that in Dol-Rayen, and got him drunk. He gave me half an hour with Eldan. And he said that they've never let anyone go for money. It's swear off the Guild or stay in."

"Can't they just say they swear off to get away?"

"They've probably got ways to see if someone means it."

"My first messenger was sent back from Selday with a warning," Senthi said. "But he's only a boy. These are grown men. Eldan is --what?-- twenty-three at least, and Jichan is older. I'm surprised that the people in Dol-Rayen didn't just whip Eldan and Jichan and send them home. I know it's happened to some of ours."

"Perhaps they wanted to know where the ship was to salvage it." That was Hinla, the only one in the Guild of the Nameless. "I've heard of the Order in Dol-Rayen. With friends like that, who needs enemies?"

"That's more or less what Eldan said." Vauri screwed up her eyes as if what Eldan had said was written on the wall. "They have this code of honour that forbids them to torture people--"

"Of course," Hinla said sharply. "They're the Order of the Sworn."

"But they have absolutely no qualms against keeping them in the lockup until they cooperate."

"Expensive," Airath remarked. "Could cost more to feed them than what they get from what's left of the cargo."

"It's probably impossible to retrieve the fabrics and spices," Senthi said, "but there should be a lot of glassware aboard. Some gold as well, but the glassware is worth more if it's still whole."

Rovan was looking into the distance, chin on hands. Senthi knew that look.

"Making plans?"

"I was wondering if it would be possible to send another ship. Early summer, when the weather's likely to be better. Good swimmers aboard, sail out empty, salvage what we can."
"'We'?"

"I'm a good swimmer. If we can get Eldan out of the lockup, he knows where to look."

"Jichan, too," someone murmured.

"You'll never get to Eldan. You can't hide what you are." Senthi was trying very hard not to make this a marital dispute in public.

"I can," Hinla said. "Or rather, I don't have to. We can just put a boat ashore, the ship itself can stay out of sight. I'm in."

"I'll come," Vauri said. "I've already been to Dol-Rayen, after all."

Rovan started to take notes. "We need a hand-picked crew. Nobody we don't know and trust, all swimmers. Might be hard." The two women leaned over his shoulders, giving advice. Senthi gave up hope that she could persuade Rovan to call it off.

"You," Senthi said to Rovan, when the others had gone home, "are not going ashore in Dol-Rayen. I'd like to keep you here, but I know I can't, so please be careful."

"Don't worry, I'll be careful. Hinla and Vauri are going ashore. It's only that I don't want them to do this without me. Not because it's Father's money, but--" He suddenly had a haunted look about him. "It's mine to do. I don't know why, but I'm certain of that. As certain as I was at our wedding that it was my fight."

"I think I understand. Eldan."

Rovan nodded. "Hinla could perhaps go and talk to the commander of the Order of the Sworn. They may be able to do something."

"The commander of the Order is Hylse these days, and I think if anyone talks to her about this it should be me."

His face lit up. It made him look like a boy again. "Do you really want to do that?"

"If it helps keep you safe, yes, I do."

Senthi went to talk to Hylse the next day. She crossed the practice yard wrapped in her mastery, making young journeymen part before her like a flock of sheep.
The office was much tidier now. Clearly Hylse's neatness when she was weapons master had carried over.

"What do you know about the Order in Dol-Rayen?" Senthi asked.

Hylse put down her pen and folded her hands. "May I ask why you have to know that?"

"They're holding my brother-in-law prisoner. He hasn't done anything unlawful."

"If your brother-in-law is in your Guild, I can imagine that the Order in Idanyas wants to detain him."

"Even if he's innocent of any crime?"

"Being in the Guild of the Nameless is unlawful in Idanyas. I'm not saying I agree or even condone it; I'm only telling you the facts."

"When Eldan sailed from Essle he didn't seem to be gifted. I admit that it's years ago, but people don't usually discover that they're gifted when they're over twenty. His only crime is that he was shipwrecked and picked up from the sea together with someone who is in our Guild. And that one's not guilty of anything beyond that either, as far as I know."

"I have no authority in Idanyas. Either you need to write to the Hand of Anshen directly and put the problem to him, or to go to Valdis and ask authorisation from the commander there."

"Write to the what?"

"The Hand of Anshen. That's the title of the commander of the Order in Dol-Rayen."

"Thinks a lot of himself, doesn't he?"

Hylse sighed. "I told you I don't have any authority in Idanyas. If I did, I'd probably try to stop him giving himself airs."

"Could you at least give me an introduction?"

"Do you mean to go to Dol-Rayen yourself? I'd advise against it."

"Hinla of the Rising Sun is going."

"Ah. I'd have expected her here instead of you, then."

"It's not her brother-in-law."
"All right, I'll write a letter for you. I can't promise that it will work, though."

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Hinla, the gods only knew how, got hold of a small fast ship that wasn't commissioned to go anywhere else. Senthi didn't even want to know about it. If it was intended to stay out of the books of the Temple, Temple clerks shouldn't know too much.

"Don't use any of Father's money," she said to Rovan. "Use some of mine."

It seemed important that Lydan stayed clear of this enterprise, whether it was necessary or not. Rovan didn't want to take the money at first, but Senthi had learned to be persuasive in her five years in the Temple.

Finally, when a first suspicion of summer made the town unpleasantly hot and smelly, they were ready. Senthi gave Hylse's letter to Hinla "for the Hand of the Nameless", which made Hinla snicker.

Their last night together Senthi and Rovan didn't sleep. First they were otherwise occupied, then they found that sleep was impossible. "Take care," Senthi said. "Think of us."

Early in the morning Senthi took Aidan to the harbour to see the Swallow off. Rovan had already gone to get his trunk aboard. It was very quiet on the quay: hardly anybody knew of the venture. As they were waiting for Rovan to come and say goodbye, someone in a grey cloak came to stand next to them. Hylse.

"I thought I'd put in an appearance," she said. "After all, it's Order business of a sort."

She and Hinla talked for a long time in the shelter of a little toolshed, while Rovan and Senthi stood holding each other with Aidan in the middle. They didn't let go until the child squirmed.

"I'll miss you," Senthi said. "I know you can't not go. I'd go too if I didn't have so much to keep me here."
"If I don't come back--"

She put a finger on his lips, but the words hung almost visibly in the air between them.

Something scratched at the edges of Senthi's consciousness when she sat working. Coming up from an intricate calculation, she recognised it as someone trying to call her through the protection on her room. She made an opening.

*You should come here at once,* Hylse said. *A messenger from Idanyas.*

Her mind-voice had overtones of alarm. A cold foreboding ran over Senthi's back, her throat constricted and she shivered in spite of herself. Rovan. She closed her account book with a slap, upsetting the inkhorn, and ran out of the room and the Temple and straight to the Order house. Hylse was already at the gate, waiting for her. "I've sent for Lydan too," she said, "but he's out on business."

The messenger was lying on her side in the only occupied bed in the infirmary. "This is Senthi," Hylse said. "She wants to hear what happened."

The girl --hardly more than that, she must have been about fifteen, though the pain in her eyes made her look older-- tried to lift and turn her head but found that she couldn't. Senthi crouched at the head of the bed so she could look her in the eyes.

"They caught us," the girl said. "They captured the ship. They took us to the castle, and Hinla said it was all right because it was the Order, but it wasn't all right, they flogged all of us and they hanged Hinla and Vauri and Rovan, and then they threw me out of town because they said I was of the Nameless, but they were of the Nameless themselves, and I walked all the way to Selday, five weeks, I walked for five weeks and there wasn't any ship but the fisherwoman said she'd take me to Essle, and then I came here because--" She had to stop to catch her breath, and Hylse laid a hand on hers. "It's all right. Take it easy."
They hanged Rovan. Senthi didn't have to ask the girl to show her; she'd been so full of it that it was easy to see. She gripped the side of the bed so hard that her knuckles grew white.

"Come," Hylse said. "They have to change her bandages. I'll get you something to drink."

With a cup of wine inside her, Senthi felt slightly better. The tension didn't go away, but she stopped shaking. "Where's that fisherwoman?" she asked. "Did she go back to Selday?"

"No, I put her in a guest room. She's one of yours. I thought she could perhaps stay with you for the time being. It's... uncomfortable... both for her and for us."

Senthi nodded. "We have enough room." She looked at her hands, clenched in her lap. She felt numb all over. "They hanged Rovan. What about Eldan?"

"She didn't say anything about Eldan. Perhaps she never saw him." Hylse came to stand behind Senthi and made as if to lay a hand on her shoulder, but remembered just in time. "I'm so sorry."

Senthi put her face in her hands and cried.

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The fisherwoman was weather-beaten, no longer young, with a hard look about her that spoke of more than a hard life. She sat on a chair opposite Senthi in the front room, looking uneasy.

"Sit on the floor if you like," Senthi said. "I'm a thatcher's daughter myself. I wasn't always a lady with chairs."

The woman lowered herself to the floor gratefully. Senthi sat on the floor as well. "My name is Senthi," she said. "You can stay here as long as you want. If there's anything you need, tell me or my maid."

"Thank you. I'm Rhaye. Is the girl all right?"

"The people in the Order say she'll live."

"Praise Archan. Oh--" She clapped a hand to her mouth.
"You can safely praise Archan in this house," Senthi said with a wry grin. "I understand that's why you were glad to have a reason to leave Idanyas."

"Yes. I'm a widow anyway, no family at all."

"Did they kill your husband too?"

"Oh, no, the sea killed him a long time ago, before we even had any children."

Alaise came in, leading Aidan by the hand. "Master Lydan is home," she said. "I haven't told him anything yet, but I think he knows."

Senthi picked up Aidan and went to meet Lydan in the kitchen. He looked much older all of a sudden. She embraced him. "You know, don't you?"

"The man from the Order told me. Have you heard anything about Eldan?"

"Not yet. The sailor might know."

They held each other for a long time without speaking. Lydan cried bitterly. Aidan, seeing his grandfather cry, started to cry too. Senthi felt more tears welling up, but pushed them away: she had done her crying already.

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The Order sent the sailor girl to stay with Senthi as soon as she could be moved. Aine came in every day to check her wounds. "That's going to take a while," she said. "First walking for weeks, then the sea-water. She's likely to be disfigured for life."

"She told me the other sailors got ten lashes, but she got thirty because she's in the Guild of Archan. There was another one who got thirty and it killed him."

"I'm not surprised. What surprises me is that it didn't kill her. She's very strong."

"I wish I was stronger."
"You ought to be a bit weaker," Aine said. "Come on, let's go blow your mind."

"Wine doesn't get me drunk. I'm a priestess of Mizran. Job training."

"Who said anything about wine? I know where to get the best pipe-weed in town. Doctor's orders."

"But--" Venla will kill me. But Venla doesn't have to know. I'm not apprenticed to her any more. "All right."

"That baby of yours is weaned, isn't he? Thought so. So is mine. We shouldn't do it otherwise, it gets in the milk and gives them a headache."

They ended up in a small smoking-house in the West Harbour, where Aine turned out to be well known. They shared a water-pipe. Aine had to teach Senthi to smoke, but when she got the hang of it the taste of the pipe-weed was actually not bad. It didn't seem to do much more to her than wine did. It made Aine very thoughtful: she was tracing patterns in the sand on the floor with her foot.

"Am I supposed to start seeing things?" Senthi asked.

"What? Do you have trouble seeing?"

"No, I mean things that aren't there."

"If you see something, that's likely to mean it's there," Aine said soothingly. "If you're not sure just try to touch it."

Senthi touched the rough wood of the table and was pleasantly surprised by the way it snagged the tips of her fingers. She tried her sleeve, then the skin of her face, enjoying the different textures. She turned to Aine. "It works. It really does."

"See? I told you."

They walked through quiet streets in the night, stopping to eat squid and onions at a stall. They'd been friends for years; they were sisters now. When they embraced on Senthi's doorstep, she felt the edges of Aine's mind overlap hers.

"You're beautiful," she said.

"So are you. Shall I come in and put you to bed?"
It was tempting, but the last bit of rational mind Senthí could muster told her that it would not be wise. "I'll manage. Or wake Alaise."

Aine nodded. "We'll do this again, right?"

"Right." The house was quiet. She could hear sleeping people breathing, a mouse running through the scullery, the kitchen fire burning down. She poured herself a cup of milk --no wine or ale, Aine had said, unless you wanted the hangover of your life-- and sat on the bench with it, feeling every current of air the way she'd felt the currents of power just before her journeyman's trial. *I can imagine that Venla didn't want me to do this. I don't want to do it often. It's too exhausting to live one's whole life like this.*

She got into bed and fell into a heavy sleep.
Chapter 15

Mourning, Senthi found out, was a daily effort not to sit down and let the world go by as it would. She did her work without thinking. She was so good at it now that she could get away with that. Her world had become very small. It didn't matter that she was a grand master in the Guild of Archan; the Guild of Archan, for all practical purposes, did not exist.

She didn't plot revenge. Not yet. There was too much living without Rovan to get through. Aidan was a constant reminder of Rovan, looking more like his father every day. It hurt to look at him. She couldn't keep her eyes off him.

Faran took issue with her. "Your heart isn't in it," he said. "Passion is what we want. Controlled passion. Sword-fighting is a passionate pursuit, even though you can't allow yourself to be carried away. You are not a mill that goes round in the same circle every time. Try again."

She tried again, and yet again. Passion crept back, unnoticed until it was too much there not to notice. She could use the sword as an extension of her body again, be one with it as an extra limb.

"You saved my life," she told Faran.

"Nonsense. You saved your own life. I only told you to do it."

Lydan had his own way of mourning. He threw himself into his work, and when he found it was hard to do all the work without Rovan --they had been more or less equal partners since Eldan had sailed-- he looked for other partners. Senthi promised to look around in the Temple, then
forgot all about it until someone came to her office and asked for an introduction to Lydan. He introduced himself as Tarin of the Dawn.

"He deals in textiles, doesn't he?" Tarin asked.

"Yes," Senthi said, "exotic fabrics, silk, satin, velvet. He did have a setback, of course, when the Queen Mialle was wrecked."

"Oh, was she wrecked? It was never announced."

That was true; they had discussed it only in the small circle of people who had had shares in the voyage. She would have to make it public now. "Yes, last year, off the coast of Idanyas. They tried to salvage, but without success."

"Is that the expedition that Hinla of the Rising Sun didn't come back from?"

Senthi nodded. "She was killed in the salvage attempt. So was my husband, Lydan's son."

"Yes, I heard you were recently widowed. My condolences."

She invited him to dinner. He was a pleasant man, careful not to step on any toes while still coming to the point. He wanted Lydan to work as a subsidiary, continuing his own trade under the protection and responsibility of the Dawn. Senthi knew that the Dawn had done that with other small companies and merchants looking for partners. It was one of the strategies that had made the Dawn one of the largest and most powerful trading houses. More often than not it also made the new partners very rich.

"Do you think I should do it?" Lydan asked when Tarin had gone.

"I'd do it if I were you," Senthi said. "But you need a contract that gives you a way out. Do you mind if I write one up for you? I don't think I trust Tarin or his lawyers to do it."

It was hard, very hard, and it made her wish she'd studied law. She consulted Airath, who had studied law, and they came up with something that Lydan understood, Tarin accepted and everybody agreed with. They went to the Crown to sign it over a meal that Tarin paid for out of expenses.
Last time I was here, it was with Rovan. After my first Town Games.

Senthí hadn't been in the Town Games for two years, the first time because she had been nursing, the second time because she had been too busy outfitting the Swallow. She should start training seriously again, not only to stay sane, but to win.

They ate and drank. Tarin and Lydan signed. Senthí put the Temple seal on the contract and the copies, right there in the Crown in sight of everyone, and sent the inn's messenger boy to take the copies to the Temple. It was never wrong to impress someone from the Dawn.

"It's done," Tarin said. "Let's have another jug of wine."

Later, in bed, the fleeting thought that she'd had when writing out the contract came back to her. I should study law myself. I don't see why I shouldn't go to Ildis.

She went to see the principal of the trade school. "No reason you shouldn't go to Ildis," she said, almost exactly in Senthí's own words. "If the Temple can spare you for a year, it would be a very good idea. Use me as a reference if you think it's useful."

It turned out not to be necessary. Airath had already talked to the mantled priests about sending her to Ildis.

The hardest decision was what to do with Aidan. She was tempted to take him along, but she was going to Ildis to work and learn, and having a two-year-old around might keep her from that. She could take Alaise, but Alaise had been talking about getting married for the past year and a half. She could hardly expect Aidan to get used to another nursemaid, another home, a house without his grandfather, and a mother who worked all the time. Well, he already had a mother who worked all the time; that wouldn't be the problem.

She decided to leave him with Lydan and Alaise and travel alone.

"But I was just going to tell you I'm leaving," Alaise said. "It's-- well, I'm pregnant."

"So you are." It was easy to see, even though she wasn't showing yet.

"We're getting married at the Feast of Timoine."

125
Senthi had been considering that already. "How does that keep you from staying? You can have the two rooms upstairs at the back. You and your husband --it's that butcher boy, isn't it?-- and the baby. You can look after Aidan as well as your own child and I'll hire another maid to do the heavy work. You keep the same pay, and I'll see that there's enough housekeeping money even if Lydan doesn't start earning more soon. How does that sound?"

"Too good to believe," Alaise said.

"You'd better believe it, because I expect you to be here, with everything in order, when I come back."

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"They're grooming you for Mighty Servant, likely as not," Aine said as they were having a farewell dinner.

"I don't want to think about that. Not yet, anyway."

They didn't go to the smoking-house, because Aine was pregnant again. "Every time he comes home he only has to point at me to knock me up. Good thing he's away most of the time."

Senthi snorted.

"Sorry, didn't mean to hurt you."

"It's all right. I'll get used to not having a husband. At least you have one."

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Senthi packed. She was going to travel light; she only needed travelling clothes and a few decent things to get started. Ildis would certainly have dressmakers. That the Temple sent her meant that the Temple was paying, but also that she'd have to put in some work apart from her studies when she was there. She didn't mind: working agreed with her.
Rovan's clothes chest stood next to hers at the foot of the bed, untouched since he'd left on the *Swallow*. She opened it, letting the familiar hose and shirts and jackets spill through her hands.

Something caught her eye under the clothes: an oval box made of thin strips of wood, such as children buy at the Midsummer fair to keep their treasures in. There was something heavy in it that didn't rattle. It turned out to be a hank of hair, a braid silver-blond like the one pinned in a coil at the nape of her neck, tied at both ends. She fought back the tears welling up behind her eyes.
Chapter 16

It was strange to be in Valdis again. It took Senthi some effort to remember that she wasn't being hunted this time, that she was free to go where she pleased and do as she liked. She put up at one of the inns the Temple had recommended, the least upmarket one, because she didn't want to be conspicuous here. She'd make an effort in Ildis; here she disappeared into the crowd in hose and a jacket of Rovan's that she'd taken out of his chest at the last moment.

She spent most of the day strolling through the city, seeing familiar places with new eyes. People rolling barrels, a noblewoman with a chestnut horse she could barely control, a pair of priestesses of Naigha clearly coming back from a funeral. One of the priestesses was familiar, a plump young one with curly hair that tried to escape from the braid. Senthi touched her sleeve and she stopped in her tracks.

"Maile?"

The priestess looked at her wonderingly, then incredulously.

"Senthi! Is it really you?"

"Yes, it's really me. You haven't changed much."

"You have. Have you come back?"

"Erm-- can we sit down somewhere?"
"Well--" She looked around, noticing the novice who was hovering a few yards away. "Go on to the Temple, please, Lyase, and tell them I'll be late."

They sat down on a bench in front of a closed shop. "Well, have you come back?" Maile asked.

"Not really back. I'm on my way to Ildis to study law. I'm working for the Temple of Mizran now."

Maile bit her lip, exactly as she'd used to do years ago. "We were wondering about you. Worried. We thought you'd fallen into the river or something. We searched for you for weeks and then Ranaise said that you were in Naigha's hands and we gave up."

"I thought I'd killed you."

"Killed me? I only fell and hit my head against the bed when we had the argument. Knocked me out for a while. Anyway, you were right."

"I don't even remember what the argument was about."

"Let's not remember it." Maile took Senthi's hand. "What happened to your markings?" She had several more markings herself, going under both sleeves.

Senthi let go of the protection that she'd put on every day for seven years now. The snakes' heads appeared on the backs of her hands.

"How do you do that?"

"With my mind."

Maile's eyes widened. "You mean, just like that? You think them away?"

"Well, they don't go away. You don't see them any more, but they're still there." You have been marked. She made the markings invisible again.

"Where did you go to learn all that? And the Temple of Mizran, no less. What happened?"

"I went to Essle. I was taken to Essle, really, it's a long story and not all that flattering, but I ended up living with someone who taught me to use my gifts, like Erne."
"And you stayed there all this time?"

"For a while. Not after I got married. I have a little son. He's two."

"Married! A son! Did you bring them?"

"I was widowed this summer. Aidan is in Essle with his grandfather."

Maile put an arm around Senthi's shoulders. "That's too bad."

They sat in silence for a while. Maile got up and shook out her robe. "You're coming to dinner, of course."

Senthi shook her head. "I'd rather not. Do you mind?"

"Yes, I do." For a moment, she was very much the old blunt Maile. "I mind. But I understand. I'll tell the others that you're all right. You know, Arvi got all her marks in two years and went back to Ryshas to serve with her mother in Rychie Nesh. But the rest are still there, even Jerna."

"I'd have liked to see Arvi. Well, I may go to Ryshas in a few years."

She walked along with Maile, who was clearly going home. "Who is High Priestess now?"

"Ranaise."

Senthi nodded. "Doesn't surprise me."

There was not really any more to say. They embraced in the gate to the Temple. The heavy doors closed behind Maile.

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There were guards at the gate of Ildis. In Valdis, the town guard opened the gates at dawn and closed them again at sunset, with a single guard keeping watch rather carelessly during the day. Here there were two of them, both in the Guild of Archan, who stopped all travellers and asked what their business was.

"To study law at the Academy," Senthi said.

"And where are you from?"

"Essle. The Temple of Mizran sent me."
The guard looked her up and down. He wore a short dark blue surcoat with a yellow crescent moon. The sword at his side looked well-used.

"All right. Don't forget to report to Loryn at the Guard house."

"Loryn?"

"Our grand master. Everybody reports to the grand master here. This street to the end, turn right, you can't miss it."

"Arin, she's a grand master herself, can't you see Archan's blessing on her? She can find him anyway, no problem." The guard on the other side of the gate finished writing something that she gave to a man leading a heavy-laden donkey. "Here's your pass," she said to him. "It says where to go. If you can't read, ask someone."

"Do I get a pass too?" Senthí asked.

"No, you're one of ours, you can go where you like once Loryn has seen you. Only those of the Nameless need passes."

She walked into the street beyond the gate. It was much narrower than anything resembling a main street in Valdis or even Essle. The houses on either side seemed to have been built on top of each other. She paused, letting the town impress itself on her. There was a clearly distinguishable grand master's mind on what she thought must be the other side of town. It wasn't very far away, but there was hardly any human activity beyond it. *I never realised that Ildis was so small.* Following that direction she came to a large stone house like a castle, much rebuilt, standing against the town wall. It had a single tall round tower with a strange greenish dome on top. Young people, and a few older people, went in and out. That couldn't be the Guard house: it must be the Academy. Next to the Academy, seemingly stuck on as an afterthought, there was a smaller building that had to be the Guard house by the protection on it.

She knocked on the door. As she waited for it to open she wondered whether she shouldn't just have announced herself, but it was too late for that now.

"Come in." A guardsman --young, but definitely a master-- held the door open for her.

"I've come to see Loryn."
"He's expecting you."

"I suppose I'm as easy to see as he is."

That earned her a grin from the guardsman. He showed her into a room that turned out to be a refectory much like the one in the Temple of Naigha in Valdis. A young man got up from a bench as she came in.

"Welcome. I'm Loryn." He was hardly older than she was and carried himself with a mixture of easy assurance and wariness, like a cat. He was wearing about half of a Guard uniform: dark grey hose instead of blue, and a white linen shirt with wide sleeves gathered at the wrist instead of the Guards' grey one, but covered with the surcoat with the crescent moon all the same. "They won't let me in the Guards yet, Archan knows why, I've been a master for half a year now."

"Perhaps they think you'd be wasted? You're the only grand master here, aren't you?"

"Until you turned up, yes. Are you staying, and if you are, shall we fight it out or do you bow to me?"

Senthi laughed. "I've only come to study law, not to rule Ildis. I'll be gone again in a year. And no, I won't bow to you. I haven't even bowed to my own teacher since I became a master."

"We're equals, then, except in matters that affect the Guild in town." They touched hands. Tendrils of thought ran through Senthi's mind that could only come from Loryn, patterns that were familiar but yet not hers, exhilarating new tastes and smells and sensations. Senthi carefully closed off the parts she didn't want Loryn to see and noticed that he did the same. "You're strong," he said.

"So are you."

Their hands dropped. Senthi was only in her own mind again.

"Is there a sword school in town that you can recommend?" she asked.

"You can come and train with us. You won't be the only student who does that."

"I might."
She slept in the Guard house that night, on Loryn's invitation. The next morning she was woken by a bell. She thought for a moment that she was back in the Temple of Naigha, but the presence of Archan was too insistent for that. *They have a temple here, of course.* She dressed hurriedly and went downstairs to where the presence was strongest. There was indeed a temple, a perfect cube with a fire burning in a pit in the centre of the floor. Senthi had never seen a temple to Archan before, but she knew that this was as it should be.

She was one of the first in the temple; clearly it had been a waking bell, not a summoning bell. Indeed, after a while the bell rang again and more of the Royal Guards streamed in, about thirty men and women in the crescent-moon surcoats, all masters in the Guild, and all roughly between twenty and forty years of age. Senthi made a mental note to ask someone where they kept their journeymen and what happened to people in the Guards who grew old.

The service started. Songs were sung and prayers said. There must be a pattern, but to see that Senthi would have to attend many more services. What she gradually became aware of was the tremendous amount of power that built up. Part of it was from the people, but more from the fire itself, from the presence of Archan in the fire. It was bracing and frightening at the same time, like standing on the quay in a storm.

Someone with gold piping on his surcoat beckoned her to the fire and gave her a copper dish full of incense. "Here, you do it. Loryn isn't there." She didn't know exactly what to do with it-- throw it all on the fire? hold the dish in the flames? She tried to gather it from the patterns of expectation floating around in the temple, and finally settled on slowly sprinkling the incense on the fire. It seemed to be the right thing to do. Expectation turned to satisfaction.

When the service ended, the man with the gold piping caught up with Senthi at the temple door. "I'm Doran. Commander of the Guards."

"Arnei Senthi from Essle."

"I knew you were coming. Did they tell you to report to Loryn?"

"Yes, and I did, yesterday when I arrived."
"All right. I'm not used to him being a master yet. He was my apprentice for too long."

"Did he stay away from the service because he's not really in the Guards yet?"

"He ought to come to services," Doran said, "or I'll never swear him in. No, I suppose he had something to do that he thought was more important. I could have done the censing myself, but when there is a grand master among us it's only fitting to let her do it."

"Thank you."

After breakfast Senthi went to the practice ground just outside the Guards' small private gate in the town wall. There were a dozen uniformed people there as well as a few others who might be students. She worked through her exercises. Muscles that she'd neglected while travelling suddenly made their presence known.

When she finished Loryn was waiting for her, sword in hand. They fought a short bout, carefully not using semsin at first, then, when people came to watch, using it to full effect. Senthi was holding back a little, anxious not to overdo anything. It ended when Loryn's sword hit Senthi's gauntlet and she had to clutch her wrist, dropping her own sword.

"You're good," Senthi said.

"You're subtle. Is that the way you learn in Essle?"

"Probably the way my teacher teaches. You fight like you should really have a dagger in your other hand."

"A dagger in each hand," he said with a grin.

"Can you teach me that?"

"No problem. Will you come and practise every day?"

"Probably, but I have to go to the Temple of Mizran and the Academy and see when I'm free."

"Not now, surely? I have something to show you."
Loryn took Senthi to a small room opposite the temple door. It was a kind of anteroom or waiting room. She hadn't seen it the first time because she had gone straight to the refectory. It had been sealed thoroughly, apparently by Loryn himself.

"Look what I've caught," Loryn said proudly. "An enemy runner on his way to the old man in Weavers' Alley. Lots of money on him as well, Guild funds, apparently. Made me late for the service."

The man on the floor of the anteroom was hunched up as if in pain. When Senthi took a closer look at him she saw that he was protecting himself with all his might. Loryn, at least she thought it was him, had tried to breach the protection but had only succeeded in part. The man was a master, probably very strong when he was well.

"What have you done to him?"

"Trapped to get him to talk. He didn't, so I got the information out of him."

Senthi heard the echo of Venla's voice in her mind, This is how you do it. Don't do it if you can do otherwise. There are much cleaner ways to get information and much cleaner ways to kill. It was also sure to get Loryn into trouble if anyone got wind of it: it gave the enemy reason to kill him outright.

"Does Doran know about it?" Senthi asked, though she already knew the answer.

"Of course not." He prodded the man with a foot. "Hey, you. Get up."

The man got up laboriously. His body looked whole, though it was hard to tell under his clothes. Loryn dragged him into the temple.

"What are you going to do?" Senthi asked.

"Give him to Archan." He was near the fire now, coaxing the glowing coals into flame with his mind.

If I had wanted him, I would have taken him. Senthi looked around wonderingly to see where the voice came from, but she saw only Loryn, ready to thrust his captive into the fire. He didn't seem to have heard anything. "Loryn?"

"Yes?"
"Does Archan speak to you? Ever?"

"You mean, in words? No, but I know what he means."

"Then come with me for a moment. I need to talk to you."

Loryn looked surprised, but he turned and hesitated.

"You see to the fire. I'll put him back in the other room," Senthi said. She took the man by the wrist and led him back to the anteroom. He followed like a lamb, stunned or merely very cautious. The door is open, she thought to him. The front door as well. I haven't seen you. Is there a doctor of your Guild in town?

Yes.

Then go there. You haven't seen me either. If you talk, you're for it. Senthi shut the door behind him and put a seal on it that Loryn would recognise as hers, but so weak that even an apprentice of the enemy would be able to break it easily. Then she slipped the bolt on the front door and went to meet Loryn at the entrance to the temple. They walked down the passage, their backs to the door.

"Archan spoke to me just now," Senthi said. "He said If I'd wanted him, I'd have taken him." She reinforced it with a mental image.

"Bollocks."

"Really. Go ask Archan himself if you don't believe me."

While Loryn stormed back into the temple Senthi noticed that the enemy runner was gone. She put a stronger seal on the anteroom door and slid the front-door bolt back. Let them wonder. Loryn knelt near the fire, flames blazing up again. Perhaps he had never put them down. He seemed to be praying, though not aloud. Senthi stayed in the doorway. The presence of Archan filled the temple; if Loryn didn't feel it now, he never would.

He stood up, turned, came across to Senthi. For one moment it looked as if he wanted to pull her into the temple, but he took her by the shoulders and shook her. "Liar! Archan never spoke to you."

"Did he tell you that?" Senthi managed to say.
"Did he tell me..." Loryn let go of her, momentarily baffled. "Archan doesn't speak to people."

"Then how do you know what he wants?"

"I know." He pushed Senthi aside roughly and rattled the door of the anteroom. "You sealed it!"

"Of course. After I put the captive in." Venla's voice echoed in her mind again, _Never lie if you can mislead with the truth_. "Can't you get through? It should be easy." She let him rattle the door some more, then took the seal off.

"He's gone!" Loryn looked in all the corners of the room, even upwards, as if he expected to find the man clinging to the ceiling like a fly. "Where did you put him?"

"Right here. Behind a sealed door."

Loryn grabbed Senthi by the shoulders again, painfully. "What have you done with him?" He glaring at her, turning all the power of his gaze on her, all the power of his mind. It was all she could do not to give in to those eyes. Her knees started to buckle. He was trying to get in. He was getting in. In a moment, she wouldn't be able to keep him out any more, and he'd rip her mind like he'd ripped that of the enemy runner. Her breath came in short gasps. She needed all her attention to keep him out; she couldn't call for help. She hoped someone would see her distress anyway. She wished they were still in the temple where it would be easier to call on Archan himself; from where they stood she couldn't look past Loryn to see the fire in the temple, and she wasn't tall enough to look over his shoulder.

"Archan shall have you instead!" Loryn started to drag her along, and though the temple was where she wanted to be she didn't intend to be there as a sacrifice. She stood as firm as if she was at a fencing match.

"Children!"

Doran was coming down the corridor from the direction of the stairs. He pushed himself between Loryn and Senthi, holding them both at arm's length. "What was that about?"
Senthí didn't know how much she could safely say. Apparently Loryn didn't either. "Er, she lied to me," he said, sounding like a peevish child.

"Senthí? What did you say?"

"I told Loryn that Archan had spoken to me in the temple and he didn't believe me." That, at least, was true.

"Did Archan in fact speak to you?"

"Yes." She felt her body tensing. "Just now, in the temple. The first time it's ever happened to me."

"When Archan speaks to you, you should heed him."

Loryn made as if to say something, but Doran cut him off. "Come, Loryn, we have business to attend to."
Chapter 17

The Temple of Mizran wanted Senthí to come in two days a week. "The Mighty Servant asked to see you, too," the priest who showed her her desk said. The idea of meeting a Mighty Servant face-to-face gave her goose bumps, but she told herself off: it was just the title of the High Priest of Mizran, it didn't mean that they were all like the one in Essle. In fact it turned out that the Mighty Servant here was a matter-of-fact woman, firmly in the Guild and disposed to like her.

"It's silver rather than shipping here, but you'll find the work familiar," she said. "Tedious if you're only looking at the surface, exciting as soon as you get through to the inner workings."

"That's what I like about it," Senthí said.

"I understand that you have been doing some trading yourself."

"Yes, but I'm perfectly willing not to do that here if it's inconvenient."

"On the contrary, any trade that goes through the Temple is convenient. As long as you keep everything on the books."

Senthí grinned. "Of course."

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The Academy seemed confusing at first: apparently one turned up when there were lectures, and those happened just about all the time. When Senthí finally got round to attending some lectures, it was easier to figure
out than she'd thought. All the teachers put their classes on the notice board and every morning there was a crowd of people discussing which were worth the trouble.

Law students came in two kinds: on the one hand noble and rich people, not necessarily both at the same time, who were there for the student life and studied law because it was the stylish thing to do, and on the other hand people like Senthi, who came to learn and didn't care much about being students as such.

Senthi fell in with a group of the latter, staying to talk after classes and going to the Carp or the Barleycorn to drink indifferent ale and discuss the finer points of the law. They were equals, even more than the people of the Guild in Essle, almost as much as her year-group in the Temple of Naigha.

She went to the Guard house in the morning before work or classes to train with the sword or to take dagger lessons from Loryn. He still wanted to teach her, though at first he avoided meeting her eyes or being alone with her. It was not clear whether Doran's business had been to chastise Loryn, but if so, it had worked.

As she learned more, Loryn became friendly again, but always with a wary glint in his eyes. It suited Senthi: she was wary herself. The first time she defeated him he gave her two daggers like the ones she had been practising with, larger than her own silver dagger, in pretty but serviceable wrist sheaths. "I've been waiting for you to earn them," he said.

She went on to prove that she had indeed earned the gift. By Midsummer she could have defended herself against almost any assailant. "I've never seen anyone learn so fast," Loryn said, and it was not only flattery but real admiration.

Not that there was much danger of being assaulted in Ildis. Compared to Essle it was a haven of quiet. Granted, there were fights every now and then when the other Guild played up, but the Guards took care to keep everything peaceful. The Royal Guards, they were called, because Queen Liase had founded the order when she was in exile in Ildis. The Academy and the Guard house were the remnants of her palace.
The Guild of Archan held the Midsummer feast in the former palace hall, the great hall of the Academy. Though it was many times larger than Venla's front room, it was nearly as full as that room had had been on Senthi's first Midsummer in Essle. She knew it wasn't even the whole Guild; some people celebrated at home or with friends. But then in Essle it hadn't been the whole Guild either: only those that Venla thought important enough.

Loryn met her at the door. "I'll have to introduce you, like they haven't all seen you before, do you mind?" Senthi did mind, but she couldn't very well say that. He escorted her to the dais at one end of the hall.

"People!" he called. His voice carried so strongly that everybody fell silent. Either the hall had been built for it or he was enhancing his voice with semsin.

"This is Senthi, in case you don't know her. Anyone who wants to challenge her should know that she can wield a sword. Or daggers, for that matter."

"The enemy ought to challenge her," someone said.

"True, but I think they got cold feet. Let's celebrate."

It wasn't until much later in the evening that she met Loryn again, as a chance dance partner. "Don't you have a masters' meeting?" she asked. "We do in Essle. Before the celebration."

"We don't really have to. The whole town is ours. The other Guild has a meeting at the Piglet. Clandestine, of course, but they're so feeble that we don't keep them from doing it. Some of the lads may go there to have fun later."

"They go to fight?"

"Well, to stir things up a bit. They hardly ever really fight."

"Can anyone go? Could I?"
"I don't see why not. You won't be in any danger. If you can't manage with your sword or your daggers you can always knock them out."

Senthi wondered, not for the first time, how much Loryn knew.

She didn't go to the Piglet after all, because 'the lads' had left even before Loryn mentioned it. Anyway, she'd had her fill of one Guild disturbing a peaceful gathering of the other one. She didn't want to repeat what had happened at her wedding, even from the other side.

At midnight she excused herself to go to the students' bonfire. The Guild didn't have its own bonfires here: it wasn't the tradition. Senthi missed that. Not only because she was so used to it, but also because she'd have liked to see Loryn light it. When she arrived at the fire --on the opposite bank of the river, where there was open space-- it had already been lit, probably by some of the people dancing around it with torches.

When the first light of dawn coloured the eastern horizon Senthi sat on a fence with a cup of wine, staring into the embers of the dying fire. She didn't feel homesick for Essle any more, the way she had in her first few weeks. Ildis had become a home to her. She liked the way people treated her, friendly and yet respectful. Nobody in Essle had ever shown her respect. Well, perhaps Perain had, but respect from the Guild of the Nameless didn't really count. Of course, everybody who mattered at all in Essle had seen her grow up from a scrawny apprentice, and she'd come to Ildis already fully grown.

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Summer in Ildis was a wet and dismal affair. Old hands at the Academy told Senthi that this was a perfectly normal summer. Some people went home for a few weeks after Midsummer, but most of Senthi's group stayed on. They did their best work when hiding from the weather in the Academy library or taking advantage of the rare sunny days and sitting on the town walls with a book. Between law, weapons training and her work in the Temple, Senthi barely noticed that the Feast of Mizran was approaching.
Wearing her robe, she really stood out in the crowd. The style of vestments in Essle was very different from that in Ildis. For one thing, she was the only one with sleeves. Also, Senthi had easily as much embroidery as the Mighty Servant.

"Shall I borrow something?" she asked a woman from her office.

"Oh, no, everybody knows you're from Essle and if they don't they should be able to deduce it. The worshippers might think you're higher up than you are, but you can let them think that, it doesn't matter. Nice work, by the way. I wish they made them like that here." The woman's own vestment had no sleeves and was much less richly decorated than Senthi's. The front panels were wider than the Essle style and it closed with a clasp.

"I wish we had clasps like yours. Mine is better now it has sleeves, but I used to have to keep pulling it forward all the time." They went into the temple companionably. "You should have seen our Mighty Servant's cope," Senthi said. "All gold. I wonder why he didn't collapse under the weight."

"I hope they never make me Mighty Servant."

"Nor me, either. At least not in Essle."

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Autumn in Ildis, as Senthi found out, was also a wet and dismal affair. Even wetter than summer, but cooler. That was a blessing, except that she got soaked to the skin a few times and had to borrow clothes from her classmates because everything she owned was wet and wouldn't dry. Fortunately she had a leather satchel for her papers. She didn't understand how Ildis, which was no more than thirty miles from Valdis, could have such a different climate.

She had told people that she was still in mourning, and she considered herself to be, but she didn't have much time for it. The memory of Rovan came up at inopportune moments, painfully, but it seemed farther away every time. As Venla had taught her, she relived it until it didn't hurt any more, until it was only one scar among many.
On the feast of Naigha she cut off her long hair and burned it in the Temple fire. She didn't have a lock of Rovan's hair, but her hair had belonged to him so much that it seemed fitting. She felt as if she was starting over again. The mourning was done with.

"You've cut your hair," Loryn said when she came to train the next day.

"Yes."

"It suits you. It makes you look stronger."

"Thank you." She wasn't going to tell him the real reason. And he was right in a way: she was stronger and the new hairstyle was a sign of that.

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The examinations were so easy that Senthi thought she had done everything wrong. Surely there should be more to it than reproducing the literal text of the lessons? There ought to be some evidence of the intricacy of the law. Cases to solve, dilemmas to judge, the way they had done in the group she had been studying with. She wrote on both sides of her paper, asked for extra sheets, all in an attempt to find the hidden meanings.

When the results were put up, she was at the top of every list.

She met one of the teachers in the hall. "You've done well," he said. "Do you intend to make your profession of it?"

"No, I've made my profession of trade. Law is only to support that."

"It's a pity. You could go far."

Senthi smiled at that. She was reluctant to leave Ildis, but there was nothing more to learn unless she really wanted to go into law. *I'll come back,* she promised.

Loryn met her at the gate as she was going. "I'll miss you," he said. "It was good to have an equal partner here. We're very short on grand masters."
"I know. That's why I'm going back. To see where I'm needed." She shouldered her bag and took one last look at the town before boarding the boat that would take her to Valdis.

Ildis had served her well. Not only her studies, but also being in a stronghold of Archan with access to a temple. And sharpening herself against Loryn-- though it looked as if Loryn had sharpened himself against her just as much. But Ildis didn't need her; Valdis might, or Veray, or even Essle itself which she'd come to think of as home.
Chapter 18

Essle. Senthi didn't remember it being so large. Probably because she had never seen the size of it properly. When she first came she had been overwhelmed, but she'd been too scared and exhausted to really see it. Later, actually living in the middle of it, she hadn't noticed because it was all around her: the way a fish doesn't notice the river or a bird the air.

She went home.

Nobody was there except an unfamiliar maid, who let her in with a suspicious look on her face. She sat in the kitchen. After a while Alaise came in, carrying a large baby and a heavy-looking basket. A little boy followed at her heels. Senthi didn't recognise him at first, until he turned his head and suddenly looked exactly like Rovan.

"Aidan."

Alaise looked at her, startled. "Senthi! I didn't know you were home. Hey, welcome back!"

"At least you know who I am. The maid looked at me as if I was a burglar."

"Oh, that's only Yssa, she comes in because Sedi's mother is ill so Sedi is staying home with her. I think that's the normal look on her face, I've never seen it any different." She put the basket on the table and the baby on the floor. The child began to wail.
"Excuse me." She scooped the baby up and went out. Senthi was alone with Aidan. He was still standing in the same spot, finger in mouth, wide-eyed.

"Do you know who I am?"

The boy shook his head. Senthi had expected that he wouldn't know her when he hadn't seen her for a third of his life, but it still stung. "I'm Senthi. I'm your mother."

The boy's lip started to quiver. Senthi put out a hand. He stepped back, cocked his head, then came forward, but still not all the way. When Alaise came back into the kitchen he ran and hid behind her skirt.

"He'll get used to you," Alaise said.

At dinner Aidan sat next to his unfamiliar mother, looking at her furtively. At least he wasn't afraid of her any more. From the side he was even more like Rovan, down to the thick brown hair that needed cutting.

Lydan hadn't changed much. He was greyer and a little fatter, "and a lot richer," he said. The deal with the Dawn was starting to pay off. "Well, have you learned law?" he asked.

"Not as much as I'd have liked, but much more than I'm likely to need." Senthi sat back, enjoying the familiar house and familiar people she could now see with different eyes. "And I learned other things and met people."

"Good for business?"

"That too." Lydan didn't have to know everything.

He looked searchingly at her, as if trying to see a change. "You've cut your hair."

"Yes, on the feast of Naigha. I didn't have anything of Rovan's that I could give."

"I took one of his favourite shirts to the Temple. I think they understood."

"I'm sure they did." Senthi remembered from her ritual lessons that people would come to the Temple on the first Feast after a loved one's death with all kinds of things. Clothes, letters, toys if the dead were
children. Everything was treated with the same reverence, as if it was the
dead person’s abandoned body.

They drank their wine in silence. Aidan climbed on his grandfather's
lap and fell asleep. "He's very like Rovan, isn't he?" Senthi asked.

"Yes, like Rovan when he was that age as well," Lydan said. "Much
more than like Eldan. Oh--"

"What?"

"You don't know, of course. I had a letter from Eldan. They let him go
in Idanyas. Finally noticed he hadn't done anything wrong. He's trying to
work his way home now, but the only ship that had a place for him was
going the long way round."

"When was that? When will he be home?"

"If that ship isn't taken or merely delayed, around the Feast of Mizran.
The letter came a couple of weeks ago."

Senthi wasn't sure if there would still be a place for her when Lydan
had Eldan back. The widowed daughter-in-law, constant reminder of the
son he had lost. Granted, she was his grandson's mother, but she didn't
want to outstay her welcome just because of that. "When Eldan comes
back, shall I find a place of my own to live?"

"Why should you? Room enough in this house. I admit that I've mostly
been too busy to miss you, but it's good to have you back."

They talked trade for the rest of the evening. "I'll go to the Temple
tomorrow," Senthi said.

"Don't you want a rest?"

"Work will be a rest after all that travelling."="=

She didn't go to the Temple right away the next morning; she went to
Venla's house first.

"You've been in town since yesterday," Venla said.

148
"I wanted to see my son. I wanted a bath for Mizran's sake. Can't a person come home in peace?"

"It's your first responsibility to see the head of the Guild in any place."

"The head of the Guild in Lenay didn't seem to mind that I came to dinner instead of breakfast."

"Oh, that one. How is the old lecher?"

"Very Eraday, as far as I know that House. Wanted to invite me to his family council to talk about starting a kind of Royal Guards. I didn't give him any opportunity to get lecherous with me, though."

Venla snickered. "And what did you think of the golden boy in Ildis?"

"He's a spoilt brat. But he did teach me to fight with daggers."

"Can you work with him, do you think?"

"If I have to."

"Hmm. In fact I was thinking of sending you to Veray, not back where you've just come from. We don't really have anybody in the east. Well, there's Aldan, but he won't last long."

"Yes, I heard that."

"Where?"

"In Valdis. I met some people from the Guild there on the way back. In fact those had been very unsavoury people, even though they were really the ones in power; Senthi preferred not to think about them too much. "I had a drink with them. They seem to know everything that's going on."

Venla turned away, looking through some papers. Senthi waited for her to say more, but she didn't seem to notice her any longer.

When Senthi arrived at the Temple, everybody already knew she was coming. Venla must have told them, or someone had seen her going into the Mighty Servant's office. Airath, for one, was very glad to see her. "You've come back just in time," he said. "Four weeks more and I'd have retired. Do you want my job? You can have it if you like."

"I think they want to send me to Veray instead," she said. Not only Venla had said so, but the Mighty Servant too: not in so many words, but
it had been clear enough what he meant. A promotion, chances to go up in the hierarchy, more opportunity to make money.

"Ah, yes, to sort out the trouble."

"What trouble?" That was new. She knew there was Guild trouble in Ryshas, or at least that it was brewing, but she hadn't heard about trouble in the Temple of Mizran.

"They sent a Mighty Servant away because she was pocketing levies. They've promoted a head clerk. All the clerks under him have no experience at all, not in trade and not in law. There's a place cut out for you."

"What will the clerks say when someone comes in from Essle to be their head clerk?"

"Well, if it were me, I'd be grateful I didn't have to do the job. The place is in a muddle."

Surely, it couldn't have been Venla who had arranged for the Temple in Veray to be in trouble. This was either coincidence or the hand of the gods. Senthi sighed and went back to her office.

It took the Temple a long time to send her to Veray. Letters had to go back and forth, and Veray was weeks away even on horseback. She tried to take up the work again that she'd abandoned to go off to Ildis, but her replacement was very efficient and there was little left to do. Instead, she gave a hand to anyone who wanted contracts drawn up, legal issues resolved or calculations checked. Most of it was make-work, though useful enough. All she really did was wait. She tried to make friends with Aidan, but the boy shied away from her.

Eldan's ship came in soon after the Feast of Mizran, just as Lydan had thought. He was gaunt, tanned, much older, suddenly a man instead of an overgrown boy. He settled into the household silently, not taking anyone else's place but fitting in as if he'd always been there. Aidan took to him immediately, calling him Uncle and clinging to him whenever he was home, much more than to Senthi herself.
Finally, just as autumn threatened to make travelling uncomfortable, Senthi heard that a horse and supplies were ready for her. The horse was in Tilis, of course, and she'd be taken there by boat with the baggage.

She hugged Lydan, Alaise, the protesting Aidan, and, as an afterthought, Eldan as well, shook hands with Alaise's husband the butcher, and left Essle once again.

The horse was her own bay gelding that she had bought in Valdis. It had been stabled for her in Tilis all this time. It greeted her with a whinny as if it still knew her. Perhaps it did. She didn't know how long a horse's memory was. She had a pack-horse this time to carry her clothes and two boxes of papers for the Temple in Veray: a piebald mare with a temper, likely to wander off and stay forever at the roadside, grazing, if Senthi and the gelding didn't keep her in check.

It was a cold journey, especially as she had to sleep in the open more often than not because there were only a few inns and farmhouses were far between. At least it was dry. Some people at the Temple had asked why she didn't wait until spring. It was clear that those people had not lived in Tilis for half their lives like Senthi: practically in the Rycha even when it was not in spate. When it was, from early spring to early summer, any road running along the river was washed away along with anyone foolish enough to be on it.
Chapter 19

Senthí reached Veray on a chilly morning, white with hoarfrost on the rushes. The same kind of weather would probably have meant snow in Ildis, but even frost in the night was unusual in Ryshas, almost as unusual as in Essle. She realised with a shock that it must be almost the Feast of Naigha already. She hadn’t been counting days, but the nights were very long.

The town lay on the north bank of the Rycha in a valley between gentle hills, a steeper hill opposite it on the south bank. A castle dominated that hill, old and squat and grey. Senthí knew it had been built by the House Brun. The baron and his family lived in it now. Vineyards were everywhere, dotted with small vegetable patches and meadows just large enough for a couple of cows or goats.

Of all the places where Senthí had been, Veray was most like Valdis: bright and spacious, not crowded like Ildis or bleak like Lenay. That she remembered Lenay as bleak could also be because she’d never been there in other than dreary weather. This was a crisp winter day with the sun doing its best to warm the cobblestones. The local brick was yellow, making it even brighter. She’d seen some brickworks on her way along the river, the clay drying in the racks. The gate guards, also like those in Valdis, waved her through without questioning. When she asked them directions to the Temple of Mizran they told her to go straight ahead and she couldn’t miss it.
It was indeed hard to miss. The Temple was the defining feature of the market square, flanked on one side by what had to be the weighing house because it had a balance picked out in red bricks among the yellow, and on the other side by the constabulary.

She didn't go in just yet. First she had to find a place to stay, to stable her horses, to wash and change; then to see the head of the Guild of Archan, this Aldan everybody had been talking about. She found a respectable-looking inn, the Bunch of Grapes, in a street leading off the market. There were some people of her Guild there and none of the other one. She took a room and stabling and asked for the nearest good bath-house.

"You can go to the corner of Hill Street," the landlord said. "Or I can fill a tub for you for threepence, here in the scullery."

"Could you? I'd like that. I think I'm too tired to take another step."

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In the warm bath, drinking mulled wine that the landlord had brought her without asking, she began to feel better. She extended her mind to look around the town. There was more conflict in the air than in Ildis, it wasn't completely a stronghold of Archan, but the Guild of the Nameless was still subdued, as if they knew who was in charge.

She found the grand master, not as strong as he should have been, but from all the reports she'd expected him to be feeble. Surprisingly, he was in the castle. He couldn't be the baron, could he? She looked closer. No, he was in an office of some sort, he would be the steward or the clerk or the children's tutor. Any of those could be a good position to lead the Guild from.

Now did she just go up to the castle and say that she had come to talk to Aldan, or would she need a ruse? Better ask Aldan himself. Master?

Yes? His mind-voice was hesitant, as if he was not used to being spoken to like that.

Senthi showed herself to him. I'd like to come and see you. Can I come just like that, or do I need a reason to be at the castle?
Come. I'll be expecting you.

As soon as she was clean and dry and had eaten a bite of bread and cheese --Aldan was likely to give her supper, but she was too hungry to wait for it-- she went up the steep winding road to the castle. It was larger than it looked from the town, looming over her as she approached the gates. She turned and looked down before she went in. The view over Veray and the surrounding vineyards was superb. She could see all the way to Nesh, half a day's ride downstream. Upstream the river disappeared in bends between the hills, but she knew that there were more villages there: Gralen, Tal-Serth, and to the south Tal-Vauryn.

"Master Aldan is expecting me," she said to the guard at the gate, a bored-looking youth in brown livery. Sure enough, an old man was coming out of the main building and heading in her direction. Before the guard could ask her name and business he was near enough to greet her.

Aldan took her to the little office where she'd seen him. They exchanged names. He poured her a cup of wine, taking none himself. "The doctor doesn't like it. If I want wine with my supper I can't have any otherwise. You are staying for supper, aren't you?"

"Yes, please."

"I'll have some brought up. Young Laran wants me to sit with the family, but I'm too old for that. We can't do all our talking in the great hall either." He pulled a bell-rope and a young girl in the same brown livery as the gatekeeper came in. "Would you bring my guest and me something to eat? With the fresh bread if it's ready."

She bobbed a curtsey and left. "One of Laran's noble children," Aldan said. "He has a dozen or so living here. Of the Houses as well as the barons. I don't know if this one has a house-name, they never use them while they're on duty." The girl came back, bringing a tray with a roast bird that Senthi didn't immediately recognise, a basket of bread covered with a napkin, and dishes of vegetables. Aldan cut a share of the fowl for her.

"What is it?" she asked. "It's good."
"Pheasant," he said. "Don't you have them where you come from? They're practically vermin here."

"I grew up on duck and moorhen," Senthi said. "I was born in Tilis."

"Ah, Tilis. Not washed away by the Rycha yet?"

"Not the last time I was there. I came through on my way here."

They turned their full attention to the food for a while. It was very good: the pheasant succulent and tasty, the bread crisp with freshness, the beans and turnips well-buttered. "Tell me," Aldan said as Senthi mopped up the last of the juice with the last of the bread, "have you come to be my successor?"

"Not as such," Senthi said, "though I may yet succeed you when it becomes necessary. I've come to work at the Temple of Mizran. My superiors in Essle said they were having trouble. I've studied law, it may be useful." She wiped her hands on the napkin. "I came to see you first. Guild before Temple. You are the head of the Guild, after all."

"Yes, that I am, whatever people down there may say." He gestured in the direction of the town. "Have you spoken to anyone else?" His eyes narrowed.

"Not yet, not beyond a good-day. I put up at the Bunch of Grapes and had a bath, then I came here."

"Good. Don't believe them, whatever they do say."

"I don't usually believe things on hearsay," Senthi said. "What kind of things are people likely to say?"

Aldan took the napkin and wiped his mouth. "I'm not well thought of," he said. "They say I'm ineffective. That I'm getting too old. I may be old, but I can still handle my end of things."

"I don't doubt that," Senthi said.

"Don't you?" Aldan said with a sweet smile. "I don't believe it for one moment. You are here to depose me and take my place, like all the others. Therefore, regrettably, you shall have to go."

"Certainly, when I've finished my work at the Temple. I can understand it if you prefer to choose your own successor."
"I think you don't understand," Aldan said. Suddenly he was in her mind, taking it in a vise-like grip and closing in. She called on all the stonework she had been building over the years to take refuge in. He seemed to be searching for something. The part of Senthí's mind that was still free and coherent came up with what it was: the master's command, the compulsion set on her to end her own life when her master required it. Venla had set it, one of the last things before she'd taken her trial.

_He is not my master._ The thought strengthened her. _Even if he found it, I'd have no obligation to him._ She tried to get up and leave, but her body wouldn't obey. "You're not ineffective," she managed to say.

He smiled. "No, I'm not, am I? Not much good with a knife, though, so I put you out of my way like this." His grip became tighter, but he couldn't crush Senthí's inner place. The master's command was out of his reach, however much he might be convinced that he was the master of every member of the Guild who happened to be in Veray.

She let him beat at her for some time while she gathered strength. Stone walls, granite floor-slabs. It was a pity that Aldan's room was on the second floor or she could have drawn power from the hill below the castle, but the castle itself was of old stone and it yielded the slightest bit of residual power. _Let's see him do that._ Apparently it had never even occurred to him. He was using only his own strength, none from outside, and it was running out.

_Now._ She pulled loose. She stood up, weak-kneed with exhaustion, and saw him crumple and slide off his chair. "Aldan?" She had seen no sign of Naigha: he must still be alive. Sure enough, he was breathing feebly.

Senthí pulled the bell-rope. Yet another of the noble children appeared: a slight red-haired girl barely in her teens. "I'm afraid that Master Aldan has been taken ill."

They made Aldan as comfortable as they could on the rug, covering him with the cloak that hung on a hook on the door. As the girl went off to fetch the baron, Senthí sat down at his side.

_Did you really mean to kill me?_ She spoke directly to his mind. He had difficulty understanding her, like the first time when she'd called him
from the town. Old age, his frail condition, or hadn't he used the skill much at all?

\textit{I was mistaken.}

"All right," Senthi said aloud. "But remember that I could have killed you. Easily." In fact she suspected that it wouldn't have been easy. She was glad that he had collapsed before it became necessary to try. It was better that Aldan thought she was a force to be reckoned with.

The little redhead came in with a richly dressed man, obviously the baron, and a liveried boy so much like the baron that he must be his son. "Get the doctor, Raneth," the baron said when he saw Aldan. "Looks like a stroke to me, but the doctor will know for sure. Fast." The redhead ran. "She's the fastest runner we have," he said, and turning to Senthi, "What happened?"

"He was upset about something --I think he thought I was his enemy-- and then he just collapsed."

"Yes," the baron said, "he's getting very old. His mind is wandering a bit. Sees enemies everywhere. Are you a friend of his?"

"We met for the first time today. He's an old friend of my teacher's." Not that Venla and Aldan could be called friends, exactly, but it was less complicated this way.

"I'm sorry you had to meet like this. He's usually a charming old man."

"He was very charming until it happened," Senthi said. She wasn't sure whether to stay or go, whether to introduce herself to the baron, and what to tell the Guild, as she inevitably would have to do. The baron took the first two out of her hands at least. "I've been a terrible host. Do stay and have a cup of wine with us. I'm Laran, and this is my son."

"Corin," said the boy. He was probably slightly gifted; he was at the age that it was just starting to show, twelve or thirteen.

"I'm Senthi," Senthi said. "I'm a priestess of Mizran. The Temple in Essle sent me."

"High time something was done there," Laran said. "Have you settled in yet?"
"No, I arrived this afternoon and came to see Master Aldan first. He was --he is, I should say-- the head of the, of my Guild." She didn't know these people's allegiance. Better be on the safe side.

"The Guild of the Nameless," said Corin, unbidden. His father silenced him with a gesture.

"You have to report in, don't you?" Laran asked. "When you come to another town, I mean. To the head of the Guild there."

"You're well-informed, Lord Baron," Senthi said.

Laran smiled. "Aldan told me a thing or two. I don't have the gift myself, but that doesn't mean I'm not inclined to learn." They were out of the room now, heading for the stairs, while Corin watched over Aldan. "The other Guild doesn't do that, I understand."

"They're a lot less disciplined," Senthi said.

On their way down they ran into the doctor and went back up with him. "It's a slight stroke," the doctor said. "Not unusual at his age. Did anything happen to upset him?"

"He took me for his enemy and turned on me," Senthi said. "We had a very pleasant supper, and suddenly he went all suspicious. He tried to kill me, in fact."

Laran looked worried. "You didn't tell me that before."

"It didn't seem relevant. And he never had a chance. I have some training as a fighter. I could keep him off by staying put and bracing myself. It was the effort that caused the stroke, I think."

The doctor nodded. "I think so too. Can you care for him here?"

"The children can do it," Laran said. "Good practice for them. I'll send someone if we need you."

Laran gave Senthi more wine and a soft chair in the great hall, near the fire. He was a widower: his wife had died giving birth to Corin's brother, who had died in his turn at the age of two. He had never wanted to marry again. "I don't want to marry again either," Senthi said. "My son is almost four. I left him in Essle, he knows his foster-mother better than he does me."
It was a pleasure to have uncomplicated companionship again, rather like her friendship with Aine. Laran wasn't gifted at all, but open-minded, though his son called Archan the Nameless. "He's been talking to the other children," Laran said. "There are Brun and Velain among them. Raneth is of the House Velain."

"The royal house?"

"Well, a side branch, but yes, the king is her cousin. It shows, the slight build and the red hair."

That would be a good opportunity. If she could take Corin as her apprentice, she could work on the Brun and Velain children through him. No hope of actually getting them into the Guild of Archan, obviously, even if there were gifted ones among them, but they could at least be taught respect.

She left very late, escorted by two of Laran's noble children who were all too eager to tell her what it was about. There were sixteen of them living in the castle, all in their teens. They came from most of the noble houses and some barons' families. They got weapons training, stood guard, and learned to serve before they came in a position to be served. Laran's grandfather had started it as an education for his own son and daughter, inviting a few other young people to learn with them, and it had become a tradition.

"There you are, my lady," one of the boys said cheerfully. "With the Lord Baron's compliments."

"Tell him I'll come again soon," she said. "And thank you."

They bowed to her as if she were noble herself.
Chapter 20

The Temple of Mizran in Veray was the largest Senthí had ever seen except for the one in Essle. The statue rivalled the one in Essle as well, draped with sky-blue velvet robes that would have done the wealthiest merchant proud. She stood admiring it until a clerk who had probably been standing at her elbow for some time coughed politely. "Can I help you?"

"Yes. I'm Arnei Senthí from Essle. I'd like to speak to the Mighty Servant. I think he's expecting me, though not necessarily today."

The clerk let her wait in a little bare room that was like waiting rooms everywhere, except that the floor was inlaid mosaic, like the temple hall itself. It was quite old. Someone had been very rich in Veray a few hundred years ago.

Presently, the clerk came back. "The Mighty Servant will see you now," he said. He led Senthí through a long corridor, also with a mosaic floor, with doors on one side but not on the other. Thinking back, Senthí realised that it must run the length of the temple hall. Some of the doors were open and she could see glass windows in the outside wall. Someone was still very rich in Veray.

The Mighty Servant was in the office on the corner of the building, which had glass panes in the windows on two sides. He was youngish and unprepossessing. The clerk showed Senthí in and closed the door behind her.
"So," the Mighty Servant said. "You've come. Airath spoke well of you."

"Airath did? Not Mernath?"

"The letters I got were from Airath. He wrote that you've studied law in Ildis. That is what we need. We have no one who is conversant with the law. Not even me, I'm afraid." He motioned to a chair. Senthi sat down on it. "My name is Hallei Merain, by the way."

"I'm Arnei Senthi."

Merain poured her a cup of wine from a flask that he extracted from the piles of papers on his desk. "We're a little behind in the records," he said. "I had to take over rather suddenly."

"Yes, I heard about that." It had been at least half a year ago. Surely they must have cleared most of it up by now. If they had not, the new Mighty Servant was ineffective, and Senthi had her work cut out for her.

They spent the next several hours going over the records that were 'a little behind'. A lot behind, just as Senthi had feared. She wondered what the Temple had been doing instead of putting them straight. Or, alternatively, how bad it had been before they sent for help from Essle. She carefully didn't ask Merain; he had been promoted from head clerk when he should have been responsible for getting the paperwork in order. It would perhaps have been better for Veray to be without a Mighty Servant for half a year than to be without a competent head clerk. And as head clerk Merain had been good, she could see that.

"I'll introduce you to the others later," Merain said. "Arin and Erlyn are in charge of the writing room, but neither of them has what it takes to be head clerk. Or Mighty Servant either, for that matter."

As Senthi left Merain's office, a woman came up to her. "You're the one they sent from Essle?"

"Yes."

"My name is Erlyn. Did Merain tell you about me?"

"He said Arin and Erlyn were in charge of the writing room. I suppose you're that Erlyn?"
"Yes, that's me. I wondered if we could have something to eat together
and talk."

Something to eat sounded very attractive to Senthi. She realised that
she hadn't eaten since breakfast and it was now mid-afternoon. Erlyn took
her to a little eating-house off the market and they shared a pie. It
dawned on Senthi that though Erlyn looked middle-aged, she was in fact
in her late twenties at most.

"You see, Merain doesn't know the first thing about Mighty
Servanting," Erlyn said. "We hoped you might. We can find something to
catch him on, like we did with Selle."

"Who is 'we'? You and Arin?" Senthi was stalling, trying to find out
what Erlyn really wanted. A Mighty Servant who would do her bidding,
most likely. Clearly she and others had conspired to the previous one's
downfall by exposing some minor mistake as a scandal, and they wanted
to do the same to Merain.

"Arin's got nothing to do with this. He's a nitwit. No, some of us among
the clerks." She swallowed the last bit of pie. Then she took out a short
pipe, the kind Senthi had seen sailors use, filled it with something brown
from a leather bag and lit it. It gave off a strange acrid smell.

"What is that stuff you're smoking?" Senthi asked. "It isn't ordinary
pipe-weed."

"Southweed," Erlyn said. "We import it ourselves. Not even the Dawn
knows about it yet."

Senthi doubted that --it was unusual for the Dawn not to know about
something new and exotic first-- but she didn't say anything.

"Do you want some? I've got a spare pipe."

"No, thanks," Senthi said. "I've tried smoking and it doesn't agree with
me."

"This doesn't make you dull and woozy, it sharpens you up." She took a
deep drag.

"All the same, no, thanks, I won't."
Senthi spent the rest of the afternoon house-hunting. She couldn't stay at the Bunch of Grapes forever, and she wanted to cook and eat and come home when it suited her.

She found two rooms over a weaponsmith's workshop, very cheap, but noisy by day. She didn't plan on being home by day much anyway, and living close to a weaponsmith might come in useful. There was a stable, but she preferred to take the gelding to the livery stable and to sell the mare. Pack-horses were thirteen to the dozen, but she'd become attached to the gelding and it would be good to have a horse ready in case she had to travel at short notice. Taking care of a horse was a bit much, though; she'd leave that to the professionals.

Some people from the Temple helped her move in the next day. When she was settled, a small elderly man stayed behind and hovered. "Can I talk to you?"

"Well, yes. What is it?"

"I noticed that Erlyn took you out for pie yesterday. Do you mind if I take you out for apple wine?"

They had apple wine in a small obscure inn, and bread and sharp cheese as well, and Arin --for that was who it was, the other person in charge of the writing room-- tried to get Senthi to admit that she was better suited for Mighty Servant than Merain was. She admitted no such thing. "I'm only twenty years old. I need a lot more experience. Don't you think you're better suited yourself?"

"I've never had the ambition to be Mighty Servant." This meant, Senthi thought, I know I'm not the right man but I don't want other people to know that. "I don't even want to be head clerk, I'm perfectly content where I am now." I don't want the extra work and the extra responsibility. "Merain was a good head clerk, they should have brought in a new Mighty Servant and left him where he was." Now that I can agree with. But not with me for Mighty Servant.

"Who are those 'they'? You and Merain and Erlyn, surely?"

"The representatives of the trade and craft guilds. The wine merchants have a large say in the matter. The weaponsmiths, too."
That was not what Senthi was used to. In Essle, the Temple made most of its own decisions. Representatives from the various trade and craft guilds came to ceremonies in their resplendent robes and were allowed to call themselves priests of Mizran, but very few had any real influence.

She would have to talk to some of them. That she had been appointed head clerk was a good opening: visiting people and introducing herself would be the natural thing to do. When she said that to Arin, he agreed. "I'll give you a list of who they are. I can write letters of introduction, if you like."

"Thank you. I'll write the letters myself, but I'd appreciate a list."

The next few days were taken up with getting to know the town and the Temple. Senthi found out where to buy food and other necessities, wrote letters to people on Arin's list and ran into a fencing school completely by accident when she took a wrong turning going to the market. She arranged to come in to train every morning before work. Now that she was in Veray anyway, she was determined to take part in the fencing competition on the next Feast of Mizran, three seasons away.

It occurred to her that she was putting off meeting the Guild of Archan. It was mostly that she didn't know how to go about it after her disastrous meeting with Aldan. She thought vaguely that she ought to go and see him, but there seemed to be no opportunity until Laran invited her to his table on the Feast of Naigha.

He put her at his right hand, much to her embarrassment. On his left was a middle-aged priestess of Naigha in her black-and-white robe, comfortable as if she was here every year. She probably was at that, with Laran being a widower. Corin was next to Senthi, looking as embarrassed as she felt. The rest of the table was occupied by those of the noble children who didn't happen to be on serving duty, the weapons master, and various people Senthi didn't recognise but who must be Laran's most important retainers. Except for Senthi and the priestess, there seemed to be nobody from outside the castle.

"Aldan should have been here," Laran said. "Right between you and me."
"How is he?"

"Much the same. Paralysed on the right side. The doctor says he's seen people who died very soon after a stroke, and people who lived for a while but never got any better, and people who got better after days or weeks or years, and he can't make any prediction."

"I'd say he doesn't have years, at his age," Senthi said.

"Probably not."

Senthi went to see Aldan after dinner and found him conscious but helpless. He couldn't speak, but mind to mind was possible if awkward. It seems that you have to succeed me now after all.

I might be too young. And nobody knows me.

Both can be remedied. One with time, the other with effort.

Give me your blessing, then.

He put his hand on Senthi's, his left. The right lay uselessly at his side. Power streamed from him. Trickled, really: he was very weak. Senthi opened her mind to receive it without pausing to sort it out. She knew that it would mark her as Aldan's chosen successor, but the rest --things she had to know about the situation in town-- she'd have to study later. She'd only heard about it being done, from Venla who had taken Essle from her own teacher, but it would be possible to work it out.

Call the Guild. Soon. His mind-voice was more feeble now. The priestess is here already. He did look weak enough to die any moment.

Shall I call her?

Not yet.

When she came back in the great hall Corin was tending the fire. "Did you see Master Aldan?" he asked.

"Yes. He's very weak."

"Do you think he will die soon?"

"Well, he told me the priestess is here already but he doesn't need her yet."

"He told you? How? He can't speak."
Senthi smiled and took his hand. *Like this.* His eyes grew wide. "I could teach you."

"Really? That's Guild stuff, isn't it?"

"You could call it that, yes. I'll have to talk to your father before I really start teaching you things, of course."

"Father's upstairs with Valyn."

"Of course, it's the Midwinter night. I'll come and talk to him in the morning, all right?"

Corin nodded eagerly. Senthi went home, without an escort this time, only with a lantern. She wasn't a stranger in Veray any more.

The next morning, when she came up the hill, she saw the priestess with another one on the road ahead of her, dressed in black.

"He's died, then," she said to Laran, who was in the front yard.

"Yes, in the night. I think he died in his sleep. He looked very peaceful."

"Did he have any family?"

"Not around here, at least. I think he came from Valdis originally."

"I met some people in Valdis who used to know him, so it's likely," Senthi said. She could have offered to sing for him herself when he had nobody else, but that would give away where she had learned the song. She'd rather keep that secret for as long as she could. Hiding the markings on her hands was second nature now: she had to make an effort to make them appear. The priestesses would sing. Nobody needed to know that Senthi had once been a priestess too.

"I understand from Corin that you wanted to talk to me," Laran said when they were inside.

"Yes, I do," Senthi said. "I'll be blunt. Do you know that Corin is gifted?"

"I was beginning to suspect it. I should have him trained, shouldn't I?"

"In fact I was going to suggest that I take him as my apprentice."
"In the Guild of Archan?" He said the name without any difficulty, but his eyes narrowed when he said it.

"It doesn't matter much, especially not at first. He can still choose when he becomes a journeyman. The early teaching is much the same. But yes, I am in the Guild of Archan, and that's where his first teaching will be if I take him on."

Laran nodded. "He needs teaching, that's a sure thing. And I don't know anyone else. Well, some of the other children's parents, I suppose, the Brun and Velain people. I'm more inclined to trust you, I don't really know them."

"Thank you. Shall I talk to Corin?"

"Yes, please," Laran said, sounding relieved.
Chapter 21

It was easy enough to find Corin: already, his mind was recognisable if one knew what to look for. He would have to learn to protect himself first. He was in the stable, grooming a horse and crying. Senthi stood in the doorway and waited until he noticed her.

"Oh! I'm sorry." He wiped his eyes with his sleeve, leaving dirty streaks on his face.

"You don't need to be sorry because you're sad," Senthi said. "It's Aldan, isn't it?"

He nodded. "He was like an uncle. A grandfather."

"I met him only a few times, but I liked him too," Senthi said. "I can imagine it makes you cry. But he went on the Feast of Naigha, he went well." She put an arm around him and let him cry on her shoulder. Very gently, she wrapped herself and him in protection.

He stopped crying after a while and looked up at her. "What's that? What did you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's... I can't say. It's like being inside something. Like a tent. It's something you made, isn't it?"

"Yes, I made something to be inside of. Something to keep us safe. Clever of you to see it."
"I've been seeing things for a while." The boy bit his lip, clearly trying to find a way to explain. "Aw, you know."

"I do indeed know. I talked to your father about it. He thinks I should teach you."

Corin looked doubtful. "But you're in the Guild of the Nameless."

"The Guild of Archan, yes. Which one is the Nameless depends on who you happen to learn from." She took a brush from the shelf and started to brush the other side of the horse. "If you learn from me, you'll get used to saying the name. I did."

"Did you-- start out in the Guild of Anshen, then?"

"No, I found out I was gifted and someone took me as her apprentice, same as you. But apprentices in both Guilds learn the same things."

They finished grooming the horse and went to wash. "Mistress?" Corin said tentatively.

"You can call me Senthi," Senthi said. "And anyway you haven't said whether you'll be my apprentice yet."

"I want to learn," he said. "Only I don't really know what it is that I'll be learning."

Senthi took Corin up on the castle wall, looking out over the vineyards. "How much of that does your father rule?"

"Well, he doesn't actually rule anything," Corin said. "He's just a-- a kind of high-up clerk, really. At least that's what he says it means to be a baron. Getting taxes to pay to the king, resolving people's quarrels, looking after the country. He wants to ask the king to name me his successor when he's old --Father, not the king, the king is old already-- and he's teaching me so I can do it when I have to."

"Yes, but how much of what we can see is in your father's hands? That he gets the taxes from to pay to the king, that he looks after, that he resolves things for?"

"Why, all of it." The boy looked surprised; clearly he didn't know what Senthi was going on about.
"Suppose you could talk to people in every village without going there yourself. That you could see easily when people are lying, even if they're not gifted like you. That you could count on people --your people-- sharing their thoughts with you, because you were on the same side to start with, working for the same cause. Wouldn't that make you a better baron?"

He nodded. "Yes, I think it would."

"Then I'll teach you to talk at a distance and to see if someone is lying, And I'll introduce you to people on our side when you're ready. But first I'll teach you to protect yourself against people who are not on our side."

"You mean in the Guild of Anshen? But some of the other kids are in the Guild of Anshen and they're my friends."

"There are some in that Guild who aren't my enemies either. But it's better to be able to protect yourself anyway, in case someone wants to harm you. And I'm certain that when you learn more, some people in the other Guild will want to harm you."

It was too cold to stay on the wall much longer. They went inside where Laran was waiting with a jug. Corin watered his wine, and so did Senth after she'd tried one sip. "It's very strong," she said.

"I keep it for winter. Though if I can believe the people from Valdis and Liorys, someone who has lived in Ryshas all his life doesn't know what winter is."

"I've spent a few winters up north, and if I can believe what people say about Ryshas we're having a very cold winter now. But I've never been to Rizenay where it's snow half the year."

"And they only have ale there, no wine to speak of," Corin said. He pulled a face.

Senth laughed. "You've never been to Ildis, have you? There's an inn there where they have the best ale in the world. Only it's run by the Nameless."

"Himself?" Laran asked. All of them were laughing now. They didn't notice Raneth Velain until she was standing right beside Laran.
"Excuse me." The little redhead was flushed and her hair was in disarray. "Lord Baron, I'm sorry I have to disturb you."

"Yes, all right, but what is it?" Laran wiped his eyes and took a deep breath. "You look as if it's urgent."

"Athal is in trouble. They won't let him go until he's paid up. They've got his hose and shirt. And his dagger."

"Who won't let him go and why does he have to pay up?" Laran asked. Corin sighed and rolled his eyes at Senth.

"The people at the Dog's Head. I didn't have the money either, or I'd have bailed him out."

"He's been gambling? And what were you doing there?"

"Well, he said he wanted to go into town to collect his new boots, and we're not allowed to go to town alone unless we're sent so he took me along, because I'm his cousin, and then he went in for just one moment, he said. I didn't go in, it's a creepy place."

"You can say that again. So Athal went in and lost the money for the boots, and the rest of what he had on him, and his shirt and hose and dagger and he still owes. That little... I have no words for him. If he wasn't the king's son I'd have sent him home a long time ago."

"Why can't you send him home even if he is the king's son?" Senth asked.

"Because, among other things, the king sent him to me so I could beat him into shape. As if I'm a common coppersmith. Fortunately, his sister is the heir. She seems to be sensible enough." He sighed. "Ah, well, I'll have to go. Corin, Raneth, come along, it'll be a good lesson."

"Mind if I come along as well?" Senth was already getting her cloak from the hallway. Laran absently shook his head.

The Dog's Head was in a part of town that Senth had avoided until now, more run-down than the worst streets she'd seen in Valdis. She shuddered to think that Athal had left Raneth alone outside the little inn. She'd probably been fortunate that it was mid-day and the usual crowd wasn't there yet.
Athal was inside, a fair-haired boy of about fourteen, rather too handsome for his own good. Unlike his cousin Raneth he was tall and muscular. He was also scowling, and he wore nothing but a loincloth and boots so worn that his big toe poked out through a hole. A large man and a slightly less large woman --Senthi thought they looked familiar-- were holding him and shouting each in one ear. There were no other people in the room, though scullery sounds came from behind the door in the far wall.

"Stop that," Laran said. They didn't hear him, or if they did they didn't think it worth the trouble to listen.

Senthi stepped forward beside Laran. "May I?" She took the woman by the arm to get her attention. "Just a moment, please. How much does he owe you?"

"Are you going to pay what he owes?" She didn't let go of Athal's arm, but half turned to Senthi to see her.

"Perhaps. First I want to know how much."

"Twelve riders," Athal said, and got a slap in his face from the man.

"Twenty," the woman said. "And five for his clothes and dagger."

This lesson is for you, Corin. Pay attention. Senthi looked the woman in the eyes. She was sure who it was now. It was unfortunate that she wasn't gifted, but it was still possible to make her tell the truth. Senthi gave a slight nudge with her mind, which made the woman wince and try to avert her eyes. She couldn't. "Twelve and eight shillings," she said with some difficulty.

"And five for his clothes and dagger," the man said.

"My clothes aren't worth anything." Athal got another slap in the face.

"Stop hitting the boy. What did you take from him?" The man produced a pair of hose, a belt, a padded jacket, a shirt and a cloak, all of which had seen better days but had been good quality to start with.

"And the dagger?" Senthi asked. She was still holding the woman by the arm, but she turned her piercing stare on the man now. He took a
sheathed dagger from somewhere in the folds of his tunic. Senthi put out her other hand for it.

He gave it to her. She handed it to Raneth behind her back. "Laran, could you take the children out, please? I'll come after you with Athal when we're ready."

Laran left with Corin and Raneth, reluctantly. Senthi felt a movement in the woman's arm. She wasn't holding Athal any more and there was a knife in her hand. Senthi brought her other hand down on the man's arm, hard, looking not at him but at the knife. He pulled his hand away with a yelp, releasing the boy's wrist and startling the woman. "Run, Athal. Wait outside."

Athal grabbed his clothes and ran. Senthi took a step back and put a hand on the hilt of her sword, drawing it a few inches. "Well? Do we settle, or do I cut you to pieces? Either way will do for me."

The woman couldn't speak, but the man cleared his throat and said, "Settle, of course."

"All right. Do you have paper? Pen and ink? Sealing wax? You must have, I suppose you forge documents every day. I'll write you a real document that you can redeem at the Temple of Mizran. I happen to work there, so you can be sure it's valid."

The man went to a cabinet in the corner and brought out the writing things. Senthi sat down, left hand near the top of her boot. There was no dagger there --there were two in concealed wrist sheaths and the ceremonial silver one hidden at her belt-- but it didn't hurt if they thought there was. She wrote a letter of credit and sealed it with the Temple seal. "There you are. Go to the Temple if you want the money. If you don't trust it, ask to see the head clerk."

The woman took the letter from her and read it. Her eyes grew wide. "Twenty-one? He never owed that much."

"He should be taught a lesson. So should you, by the way, but that will keep. Don't ever let that boy, or anyone else in the livery of the castle, in here again or I'll hear of it and come back to cut you to pieces after all. I know who you are. It would have been thirty, but I've docked you the two
riders you took from me in Valdis and the seven you sold me to Red Aule for."

She stood up and left the inn with the man and woman staring after her. Athal was just outside the door, dressed again. "Come, boy. I want to talk to you." They walked in the direction where Senthí could sense Corin. "Do I call you Your Highness?"

"Just call me Athal."

"All right. Tell me, Athal. Do many people know who you are? Who your father is, more to the point?"

"Not in town. At the castle they do."

"I believe you. I don't think those people at the Dog's Head knew, at least, beyond the fact that you're a nobleman. I've taken on your debt. You owe me thirty riders. Was it this quarter's allowance that you lost?"

"Part of it."

"Do you mean you lost part of your allowance, or part of what you lost was your allowance?"

"I lost more than my allowance." He hung his head, looking very young.

"What do you enjoy about gambling? The thrill of danger? The promise of easy money?"

"I don't know."

"Hmm. As soon as you find out, come and tell me."

He nodded. "You're Corin's master, aren't you? In the Guild of-- in the Guild."

"Yes, as of today. You're quick to know."

"I knew it was coming." He shrugged. "He was going on about you all the time last night."

"It's a pity that you don't have the gift yourself or I'd take you on as well to keep an eye on you."

"There are far too many people keeping an eye on me already."
They reached the inn where Laran was sitting with Corin and Raneth, eating the last few little fish pies from a large platter. "Are there any more of those?" Senthi asked. "I'm famished."

More pies came. Athal toyed with his morosely, but Senthi ate two before she was willing to do anything else.

"You got him out safely," Raneth said. "How did you manage?"

"A judicious combination of money and steel," Senthi said and bit into another pie.
Chapter 22

Putting the Temple of Mizran straight proved to be more work than Senthí had expected. Unlike in Essle, there was no constant supply of young clerks from the trade school because Veray didn't have one. The most important trade guild was that of the wine merchants and they taught their own. She managed to attract merchants' offspring and apprentices for a stint in the Temple, though, and some were very promising. She would probably be able to persuade a few to stay on.

She also had to deal with the constant pressure from both Arín and Erlyn to become Mighty Servant herself. Merain was no help: if she had suggested they trade places, he would have jumped at the chance. She might --she would, probably-- become Mighty Servant one day, but she didn't want it for years yet. Being head of one thing was quite enough for now.

Being head of the Guild of Archan meant knowing everything and everybody. She felt like the spider in a web that stretched over all of Ryshas. She took journeymen's and masters' oaths, watched over trials, witnessed fights, and was called in when anything threatened to go wrong. She did a lot of travelling; it was a good thing that places in Ryshas were mostly close together or she would have had no time left to work in the Temple. As it was, the Guild work took her at least a full day each week.
"This makes me old before my time," she said to the landlord of the Bunch of Grapes. She was sitting outside the inn, trying to have a quiet cup of wine. The wine was not a problem, but the quiet was: already, three people had come up to her to have a word. She should perhaps have stayed inside, or even had someone bring the wine to her house, but it was too pleasant an early-summer evening not to enjoy the air.

"How old are you, anyway?" the landlord asked. "Not yet thirty, I'd say."

"Twenty-one last Midwinter. I'm glad I don't look all that young. At least they take me seriously."

The landlord laughed. "It's hard not to take a grand master seriously."

"You should see the way they treated Loryn in Ildis. He was older when I was there than I am now and the Royal Guards kept him on a short leash, like a wayward puppy." She didn't know whether Loryn had been immature because he was sheltered, or the Royal Guards had sheltered him because he was immature. Venla, at least, had never sheltered her.

She sat back on the bench, sipping her wine. "Where have you been celebrating the Feast of Archan until now?" she asked. "I suppose I should do the inviting."

"Aldan used to do it at the castle. I dare say Laran will allow you to have it there as well. Is it true that you two are courting?"

"He's been trying," Senthí said. "I don't encourage him. It wouldn't be proper, anyway, with his son being my apprentice."

"How is the boy coming along?"

"Very well. He'll make journeyman by Midsummer next year, I think, at the rate he's going."

"Are you going to present him?"

"If his father allows it."

"Well, he can hardly refuse if it's at the castle, can he?"

In fact it was Laran himself who suggested having the Feast at the castle, "the way Aldan used to do it". And of course he didn't object to
Senthi presenting Corin as her apprentice. Laran was more than a little proud of his son.

On Midsummer Day it rained. Senthi went up to the castle early. She got hold of Corin and another one of the noble children who was in the Guild, Arin astin Eraday. They made sure that there was enough dry firewood, in case they would be able to make a bonfire after all. The Brun and Velain children were conspicuously absent. "The ones in the other Guild have gone off to be with their own people," Laran said. "Corin, have you seen Athal and Raneth?"

"Last time I saw them they were going into town," Corin said. "Athal wanted to borrow money, but I said I didn't have any. I sure don't want to lend him anything."

"Let's hope he doesn't sponge on Raneth," Senthi said. "If I hear that he's doing that I'll redeem my thirty riders to pay her back. From his father if I have to. I didn't make any promises to the king."

"Raneth's dirt poor," Corin said. "All the Velain are. They borrow from everybody. Well, Raneth doesn't, she's a good sort, but most of the rest do."

Senthi knew that the royal house was heavily in debt, but she had never heard that individual Velain other than Athal also made a habit of borrowing. Useful to know.

"You can go into town for the afternoon if you like," Laran said to the two boys. "The Guild meeting won't be until dinnertime."

It was still pouring with rain. "I think I'd rather stay here," Corin said.

"We can put some training in," Senthi said. "Who's your master, Arin?"

"Moryn. The wine merchant."

"Can you find him?"

Arin closed his eyes and clenched his fists. "Yes," he said, sounding surprised. "He's coming this way."

"Probably to bring the wine," Senthi said. "Lots of people will be coming here this afternoon to prepare for the feast. Ask him if he objects to you joining Corin's lesson."
"Not at all, he says, he's honoured."

"Thank him for me," Senthi said. She took the boys to the little room that had been Aldan's workroom, which she used to teach Corin now. "I've seen that Arin can find his master. I want you to find everyone likely to come here tonight --both of you, you can work together-- and fix them firmly in your mind so you'll recognise them. You probably know most people already. As far as you can reach. I expect that's the town and a mile or two outside it."

"I can reach to Tal-Vauryn," Corin said unexpectedly.

"You can? When did you learn that? It's eleven miles away."

"When you were teaching me to extend myself. I recognised the farrier. I didn't believe it so I didn't tell you, but when she came for the horses the next day she said she'd really been there."

"Well, don't go that far now, because I can't keep track of both of you at the same time and I don't know what Arin can do yet. Around the town will do."

In the next hour the two boys found all masters and most journeymen in the Guild of Archan currently in Veray. They learned to work together instead of hampering one another. Senthi got a good grasp on Arin's mind and what he had been learning from the wine merchant. He was about as far along as Corin, perhaps more solid, but a little less quick to learn new things. They got on well together. When they kept finding the same people, they collapsed in giggles.

"You look like my little sister when you're hooting like that!" Arin cried, still weak with laughter himself.

"You have a sister? Where have you been hiding her?"

"Oh, you'll see her soon enough, they're all coming for the wine feast. But she's too young for you, that's a sure thing. She's only nine! Well, okay, she'll be ten at the wine feast, but still a little thing regardless. It's as if you'd be courting Raneth."

"I've seen you making eyes at Raneth, though," Corin said, wiping his eyes. Arin punched him in the side.
"Hey, lads," Senthi said, "I think it's stopped raining. If you want a run outside before you have to be on your best behaviour, now is the time."

They went into the yard. The rain had slowed to a drizzle. Just as the boys were going out and Senthi was still standing in the gatehouse, Raneth and Athal came in.

There was something strange about Athal, something subtly wrong. Senthi didn't know what it was until Raneth accepted a towel from the gate guard and dried her hair and face.

"You," she said to Athal, "are not wet."

He scowled. "Well? What about it?"

"You should be wet if you've been out in that weather all day. Raneth is wet. She's positively drenched. And you're supposed to have been with her all the time."

"It's none of your business."

"You're right, unless you've been to the Dog's Head again. It's the Lord Baron's business. Has he, Raneth? Been to the Dog's Head, I mean?"

"No." She made a small sound as if she was going to say more, but Athal glared at her and she was silent.

"Come along. Raneth, you go and change into dry clothes and then I want to talk to you. I'll be in Aldan's old office." Senthi resisted the temptation to give Athal his talking-to herself, delivering him to Laran instead.

Raneth came to the office, dressed in something that reminded Senthi very much of the gown Venla had given her for her first Midsummer in Essle, except that it was green instead of blue.

"Didn't you have any ordinary dry clothes?" Senthi asked.

"We're going to a party later. It's easier to put on my party dress now than to change twice in one hour."

"I see." Senthi looked hard at her. "So, now Athal isn't here, can you tell me what you wanted to say earlier? The truth."

She didn't cower: she was a Velain. The spirit of Vegelin the Great was in this child, as well as the first glimmer of a gift. The temptation to touch
the gift and develop it was overwhelming. Senthi didn't want the royal house as enemies, however; she kept herself in check.

"Well, Athal didn't go to the Dog's Head, but he did go into a house and talked to some people. I don't know what it's called, or if it's called anything at all, but I could find it again."

"And he left you alone in the rain?"

"I wasn't alone. My cousins were there and I borrowed a horse and we went for a ride."

"In the rain?"

"I like riding in the rain. So do Alyse and Jeran."

Senthi thought for a moment. Raneth was of the House Velain; her cousins were called Alyse and Jeran. "You mean, Athal's sister? The crown princess? And her husband, Jeran astin Hayan?"

"Yes."

"And were they in that house where Athal went and talked to some people?"

"No, they were in the Crown, well, in front of the Crown under the awning, drinking wine. I could see them from where Athal left me, and I went over to them because I wasn't comfortable standing there."

"I can imagine, if it's like the last time Athal left you in the street. But didn't you think of Athal being alone after he was done talking?"

"He said he'd be all afternoon. He gave me six shillings to buy something."

Senthi wondered how Athal came by six shillings, but Raneth probably wouldn't know. "And to keep silent about where he was?"

"Er, well, yes. Not to tell Alyse that he was in town, in fact. She thought all the time that he was up at the castle. I didn't want to lie to her, so I just didn't say anything. We were much too busy riding to talk anyway."

"I don't have time for it today, but could you show me the house tomorrow?"
"Sure." She hesitated, with a look on her face that might mean an unspoken question.

"I don't think anybody is angry with you."

"It's not that. It's-- I can trust you, can't I?"

"As far as someone in the House Velain can trust someone in the Guild of Archan, yes, you can."

"Athal's been saying that he'll tell my parents that the house is full of your Guild here, and they'll make me come home when they hear."

"I wouldn't call the house full of us, there's only Corin and young Arin Eraday. Do you really think your parents will mind that much?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. They said they'd want me trained if I turned out to be gifted, and they'll want me trained in the Guild of Anshen, of course. All our family is. Er-- do you mind?"

"I'm hardly in a position to mind," Senthi said. "Where you're trained is your decision. And your parents' decision, of course, but mostly yours. If you should want me as your master when it comes to that, here I am."

Raneth grinned uneasily. "Oh, and about the other thing, I shouldn't worry too much. I think it's just something Athal says to keep you scared enough to do as he says." She didn't tell Raneth that she really appeared to be gifted; not yet.

So Athal was a blackmailer on top of all the rest. There must be some way to get a hold on him without causing a court scandal. The house in town might yield some clues.

People started coming in and asking for her then, and the matter disappeared from her mind until she ran into Laran, dressed to the nines with a swirling velvet cloak.

"You look like a nobleman," she said.

"I am a nobleman. Very much so at the moment. I'm going to celebrate Midsummer with Her Royal Highness the crown princess. And her pesky little brother, worse luck."

"Did the little brother say anything useful?"

"He said those people knew ways to get more money."
"Money-lenders?"

"Possibly, or something less savoury. He wouldn't tell me where, though."

"Raneth is going to show me tomorrow," Senthi said. "I think we should protect her."

"You have the sword." He pointed to the scabbard at his side. "This one is just for show."

"Are you hiring me?"

"Asking you nicely. You like the child, don't you?"

"Who, Athal or Raneth?"

He made a face at her.

"All right, I'll look after her, at least when she's with me. I can't guard her all the time, though, unless she decides to go into finance as well as joining the Guild of Archan. I don't know which is less likely."

"I'll assign one of the Brun children to her. One --two if I can-- with sharp eyes and a sharp blade. For tonight, she's under my sharp eyes, at least." He swept out, collecting Raneth and a subdued-looking Athal on the way.
Chapter 23

Senthi sat in the place of honour at the table, Laran's place. Tonight, the Great Hall was hers. All these people were her people. There were even more of them than at the meeting she'd called to show herself to them, because the apprentices were also there: about eighty in all, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, but all in the same Guild and all under her leadership. Not the whole Guild of course --in a town the size of Veray that would be hundreds if not thousands-- but those who were active, near the centre.

She'd put Corin at her right hand, Arin Eraday at her left, though he was no apprentice of hers. They made a nice pair, both in the brown livery of Laran's household, one dark and one fair.

She felt strange. There was no conflict, nothing to prove. She was so used to fighting and winning that having won already, with nothing to fight for, made her uneasy. There wasn't even anything to be wary of: the other Guild would also be feasting, and this wasn't Ildis where a group of young people would go out to taunt the enemy as a festive tradition. She had made very sure of that. If it had been the custom, she would have forbidden or at least discouraged it.

I wonder if Venla felt like this. But Venla had never seemed uneasy. Senthi was almost sure that she didn't look uneasy, however much she felt that way. Perhaps Venla's poise had been a façade as well.
They had held a short and cursory masters' meeting once everybody was there, going over accounts and seeing if there was anything else that needed to be gone into: new apprentices, apprentices made journeyman, journeymen made master. It looked as though they had handled most of that already at the first meeting. The food was excellent: Laran had lent them his kitchen staff and the Guild members had brought the ingredients. The wine was from Moryn, which was saying enough: he had the best in town. Nothing kept them from having a party.

They had a party.

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Just before midnight Corin and Arin took the other apprentices out. When the journeymen and masters got outside the fire was already blazing. People had brought keepsakes they no longer wanted to keep, embarrassing letters, objects from a former life, to commit to the flames. Senthi realised that she had nothing she would rather be without. She was of two minds about that: she wanted very much to have something to throw on the fire, but on the other hand it meant that her life was clear and straight now, and she was glad of that. She wished her hair had grown enough to cut it off again. In the end she cut one lock with her silver dagger and tried to toss it on the fire, but the wind carried it away in loose silvery tendrils.

She sat by the fire until dawn, feeling the power around her.

Laran found her there when he returned from celebrating with the crown princess. "Up already, or still up?" he asked.

"Still up. You too, I suppose."

"Yes. I left the children in the Crown, they were falling asleep on their feet."

"You could have stayed too. There's been no trouble at all here."

"I know, but I'd rather be in my own bed." He looked at her and sighed. "I'd invite you, but I know you'll say no."

"No." She laughed. "I mean, yes. Yes, I'm saying no."
Raneth was eating a hearty breakfast when Senthi arrived at the Crown, only a few hours later. "Morning. Athal's still asleep, I think he had a bit too much wine last night."

"Good. We don't need him anyway. Quite the contrary."

The house that Raneth took Senthi to was indeed not far from the Crown: they could see the front of the inn from the spot outside the door where Raneth had waited.

There was nobody there. Senthi rattled at the front door and it opened easily. "It's not even locked," Raneth said.

They went in. The house was really deserted. It was badly in need of repair as well. The recent rain had left a puddle on the floor. Water was dripping from the ceiling: the upper floor must be flooded.

"I'm sure it's this house," Raneth said.

"Just a moment." Senthi probed the room for residual power. "There have been people here. Recently. I recognise Athal."

"Even though he's not gifted? I thought only gifted people left traces."

"You've been learning already? Everybody leaves traces, but the traces gifted people leave are easier to see. I happen to be able to see almost everything. I can see, for instance, that two people were here with Athal, but I don't know either of them."

"I did see two people, but I don't think I'd recognise them."

"Could you see if they were men or women, though? Old or young?" Senthi asked.

"Men. I heard them talking. Not young, older than you at least. Thirty, thirty-five, something like that. --Can you see that, too? No, of course not or you wouldn't have asked."

"I thought so. Good night."

"Good night."

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186
"Not from the trace only if I don't know them. And they almost have to be gifted for that." Not Lan and Lysna, then; Lysna might be tall and have a deep voice but looked and sounded unmistakably like a woman. "Did you hear what they were saying?"

"Not all of it. Athal said he wasn't in funds but he was a prince so he could get things done. I think he was promising them favours later if they gave him money now, but then they went too far away and I didn't want to go after them."

"I don't blame you."

They went up the stairs. The floor there was indeed flooded. "Nobody here either." It looked as if there hadn't been anyone here for years. "Careful," Senthi said, just in time, as Raneth put a foot through a floorboard and could only avoid going through by letting herself fall backwards into two inches of water.

"I wonder who this house belongs to," Raneth said. "If it was mine I'd either sell it or have it repaired properly."

"What if you didn't have the money?"

"I'd sell it. Surely I could find people who want to have it cheap and can do the repairs themselves."

"Or have it cheap and never do a thing. I'll look it up in the Temple. Let's go there right away, we're not going to find anything else here."

They went down the stairs even more carefully. The hole in the upper floor had let much more water through.

The Temple books showed that the house belonged to a wine merchant Senthi knew slightly; she thought he had probably forgotten that he owned it. Now it seemed to be in use by people who needed a place to discuss things that couldn't bear the light of day. "I can't do anything right now," Senthi said to Raneth. "Thank you, anyway. Shall I take you back to the castle?"

"Radan Brun is at the Crown, we can go together."

Senthi sat staring at the papers in front of her for a long time. It looked as if Athal was mixed up in things that nobody should be mixed up in. Senthi wasn't Athal's keeper, but it was always useful to have a hold on
someone in a position of power, and Athal was very close to that. She'd have to cultivate him, even though she didn't much like him.

She went back to the Crown eventually. It was mid-day. There was no sign of the crown princess or her husband, or of Athal either. She didn't much want to hunt for him—there would be time enough for a confrontation, if one was needed. She did visit the stable, where someone of the Guild of Archan worked.

"They left this morning," he said. "The princess and her party, that is, not the castle boy. For all I know he's still in bed."

"Where did they go?"

"Turenay, to stay with Lord Jeran's sister."

That would be Ryath astin Hayan, who had inherited her parents' manor house. Senthi knew that Ryath and Alyse had been friends almost all their lives. At least they had left Athal safely in Veray. Turenay was much too dangerous a place for someone who liked gambling that much.

It would perhaps be useful to find out who exactly he had been talking to, and what benefit it brought him, but she had a strong feeling that result wouldn't be worth all the work. No, let it be inconclusive; she'd catch up with Athal when the time came.
Chapter 24

"Take these letters to be copied, will you?" Senthi finished sanding the last one and gave them to the clerk hovering at her elbow. "One for me, one for the archives. Bring the originals back when you're finished, I want to seal them myself."

"This one as well?"

"No, that one is private." When the young man had left, she read the letter again. It was from Lydan. She had asked him to send Aidan to Veray; the boy was ten and a half, old enough not to need a nursemaid any more and to learn by doing.

The letter said that Aidan didn't want to come. He wanted to go to sea like his father.

"And die like his father," Senthi growled. She slowly crumpled up the letter and dropped it on the floor. On second thoughts, she retrieved it and smoothed it out again. It needed an answer.

"I'll go to Essle myself if I have to," she said to Laran and Corin at sword training that evening.

"I'll come with you," Corin said.

"As my bodyguard?" At twenty he was a head taller than Senthi, inches taller than his father. He was filling out as well, all of it muscle.

He shrugged. "As your apprentice. Anyway, I want to see the world."

"Apprentice? You'll be a master before Midsummer."
"Well, as your journeyman, your student, whatever. To learn."

"We'll see," Senthi said. She didn't mind taking Corin anywhere to learn; anywhere except Essle. Having her student along, nearly a master or not, would make her less free to make her own decisions. She would have to set an example.

She told the Temple that she was going away on business. She told Merain, and nobody else in the Temple, that it was family business. "But I might get some real business done as well," she said. "It's likely that I'll meet people from trading houses. The Dawn, for one, my father-in-law works with them."

She left town without telling Corin or Laran, going through the west gate as soon as it opened. It was the beginning of winter, damp hazy weather that would probably turn to wet further along the Rycha. Tilis might be partly flooded already, as it sometimes was in wet winters even before the thaw from the eastern mountains put the market square in Little Tilis under two feet of water. Well, she'd see.

It wasn't all that bad when she came to Tilis: still damp, but no flooding, and after a few good years the place looked more prosperous than she had ever seen it, even when she had lived there as a child. This time there was no reason to keep out of sight, but when she inquired after her aunt and uncle she was told that they had gone north with a load of silks.

"Bad weather to carry silk," Senthi said, "with the drizzle. Gets through everything, even oilcloth after a while."

"It seems to be dry up north."

"I see. I should have gone to Valdis or Ildis instead."

"Too crowded up there. In Valdis, at least. Everybody's going there for the coronation."

"Coronation? Is the king dead, then?"

"Yes, haven't you heard?" the boatman said. "Oh, you've been on the road, of course. Well, he's been ailing for the gods know how long, it was about time Naigha came for him." He spat on the ground in the Tilis way to avert bad luck. Senthi hadn't seen that for years.

190
When she stabled her horse at the Swan, she noticed a brown mare that looked familiar. She went to get something to eat and saw why she'd recognised it.

"Good afternoon," said Corin. "I thought you'd turn up here."

"How did you get here? No, don't tell, you rode the brown mare. More to the point, how did you get here before me? I snuck out of Veray before you were even out of bed."

"Boat. I didn't ride the mare until the boatman kicked me off because he was going north and I wanted to go south."

Senthi didn't know whether to be angry or amused. "I didn't intend to take you along."

"You're not taking me along. I'm going to Essle on my own. I'm a grown man, remember?"

"Well, now we're both here we might as well travel together. You've never been to Tilis, let alone Essle, I suppose?"

"Never."

"You don't take a horse into Essle. You leave them here. There's a choice of livery stables for people who want to go to Essle and come back. You do think you'll come back, don't you? You're not going to sea to drown?"

"I want to see the city before I bury myself in Veray to succeed Father."

"I see. First lesson: Essle is not a city. It doesn't have any walls. There's nowhere to put them. Ever seen a city wall in a swamp?" Senthi realised as she said it that she had indeed seen a city wall in a swamp, but she wasn't going to confuse Corin by telling him about Ildis now.

"So what do the people who live there call it?"

"'Town', usually, or 'this place' with or without epithets. Like 'crappy' or 'godsforsaken' or 'stinking'."

"If they don't like it, why do they live there?"

"I don't know. Essle is addictive, I think. I didn't leave until the Temple sent me to Veray."
In the morning they took the horses to a livery stable and found a boat going south. "It's possible to walk," Senthi told Corin, "but not pleasant. There's miles of rubbish-town to go through."

"What?"

"People too poor to have a real house who build a hut or a shack from all kinds of waste. They're at you like flies when you go through, to gawp and beg. Especially if you look at all rich." Both of them did, even after weeks of travelling.

Senthi couldn't remember being as impressed by Essle as Corin clearly was, but then she had been much more tired and scared half to death when she first came. And later, when Ruzyn took her around town, there had always been her reassuring presence to make it adventurous rather than overwhelming. Corin stared like a ten-year-old. "How can anything be this large? How many people live here?"

"Almost as many as in the rest of Valdyas put together," Senthi said. "Look with your mind. There are more of us here than you've ever seen."

He looked. He gasped. "Great Archan!"

"You might say that."

"Who's the grand master? Is that your Venla?"

"Yes. Impressive, isn't she? I'll introduce you."

"I think I want to get used to this place first."

"All right, I'll introduce you later. We'll have to see her, though, she's the boss around here. The way people come to see me in Veray."

They went to Lydan's house. There was something subtly different about it, but Senthi couldn't determine what it was. She went round the back: the kitchen door was open. The kitchen was full of children. It took her a moment to realise that the toddler crawling under the table was a different child from the one that had been on Alaise's hip when she came back from Ildis, and that that child was the half-grown girl shelling peas. Alaise herself was standing by the fire, stirring a pot. She half turned when Senthi came in.
"Wipe your feet, if you please, and-- Oh! It's you! Where have you come from?"

"Veray," Senthi said, wiping her feet. "I've come to take Aidan with me."

"You'd better sit down," Alaise said.

"Just a moment." Senthi called Corin in. "My journeyman."

Alaise poured herb tea for the three of them. "You won't find Aidan," she said. "He left on the Albatross --wait--" She counted on her fingers. "Five days ago. You'd practically have to be an albatross to catch up with him."

"Where did they go?"

"Albetire. The direct route."

"Great Mizran." It was a good thing that Senthi's cup was earthenware and not tin, or she would have squeezed it flat. "Do they still lose two out of every three ships on that route?"

"More or less. They have the faster ships from Dol-Rayen now, but it doesn't help much." She went back to stirring, talking over her shoulder. "The master should be home any moment."

Lydan did indeed arrive moments later. He looked old and tired. He didn't even notice Senthi until she got up and stood in front of him.

"Senthi!" He embraced her. "Didn't you get my letter? No, of course not, when I sent that letter you must already have been on your way."

"I got one letter. Did you send two?"

"I wrote another one to tell you Aidan was on the Albatross, so you wouldn't be worried when he didn't come."

"Well, I am worried," she said.

"So am I."

They had dinner companionably, like in the old days. Corin fidgeted and didn't say much. When Alaise cleared the table he got up and picked up his bag. "I'll see you in the morning, all right?" he said to Senthi.
"Aren't you staying?" Lydan asked. "You're welcome. There's room enough."

"I'd rather find my own way, thank you."

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"That's a strange young man," Lydan said when Corin had left. "In his place I'd have been glad of somewhere to stay in this town."

"I think he feels that I'm at home here and he's not."

"I'm glad that you're still at home here." They talked all evening, about the late King Athal, the new Queen Alyse, Aidan, Senthi's work, Eldan who was also at sea again, Lydan's business.

He had been doing very well out of his deal with the Dawn. "I'll have to see Tarin," Senthi said. "I might have some business with him myself."

Alaise had made up Aidan's bed for Senthi, in the little room where every object was a silent reminder of her son who was a stranger. He had been a stranger to her almost all his life: ever since she had left him to study law in Ildis. He's almost eleven. I wasn't much older when I went out into the world.

The town was falling into its nighttime pattern. Senthi swept over it with her mind, recognising people here and there. Venla. Do I announce myself now or do I just go and visit tomorrow? She was no longer dependent on Venla's good will. Anyway, she could handle Venla's anger. No need to announce herself, or Venla would probably demand that she come at once. Little Alaise. No longer little, that one. The girl who had fought Rovan at what had proved to be a journeyman's trial for both of them was a grand master in her own right now. I wonder if she's in charge yet. There were more of the Guild of the Nameless around Alaise, as if they were having a meeting. Let them have their meetings. As long as they don't bother us.

She found Corin in a rather seedy part of town, not actually in Hind Town but close enough to it to be unsavoury. Well, he could sow his wild oats all he wanted; she'd pick him up in the morning. He had come to
Essle on his own, it wasn't as if she had promised Laran to keep him safe. Gods, at his age she had taken Veray. He could keep himself safe.

Senthi protected herself and the house the way she had done when she lived there. It was surprisingly hard to put the protection on the house. Suddenly she knew what was different. Nobody gifted here. It's not used to it any more. She slept, wrapped in Aidan's blanket.

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Corin was on the doorstep in the morning. He looked as if he hadn't seen a bed all night, at least not to sleep in. Alaise took one look at him and started to fuss.

"You can't go to see Mistress Venla like that," she said and started to fill a bath. "Wash, shave, wear something decent. If you don't have anything decent to wear you can borrow something of the master's. You're almost of a size."

Senthi agreed with her. "I know you're your own man here, but you're still under my authority because you're from Veray. As long as we're both in town the way you impress Venla reflects on me as well."

When Corin appeared again, washed, clean-shaven and dressed in fresh clothes --his own after all-- Senthi asked him to find Venla. "She's at the Temple of Mizran, I think," he said.

"Good. I wanted to go there anyway."

Venla received them in a small office that Senthi realised, with a start, was the one Airath had used before he retired. "You haven't taken over Airath's job as well as his room, have you?" she asked.

"No," Venla said with a smile. "I'm just borrowing the room from his successor. Now, I hear you've taken Veray."

"Veray has been thrown at me, rather," Senthi said. She told Venla about Aldan. Corin listened breathlessly; there were parts that he hadn't heard before either.
"You've done well for yourself," Venla said at last. "Mind you, I took Essle almost that young. Do you have any apprentices apart from this one?"

Senthi grinned. "No time for that, really. Not for apprentices of my own. I could have had a Velain girl, but she thought her family wouldn't stand for it."

"Hayan country, Ryshas is. You should be able to do something there."

"I have quite enough to do with the wine growers and tradespeople," Senthi said. "The nobility can look after themselves. There are some Eraday there as well. They're mostly ours already."

"Hmm. Still, I think we should have some people in court circles. Is your young man going to court?"

"He's here, he can speak for himself. Are you, Corin?"

"I don't intend to," Corin said. "And I'm not Senthi's young man. Not that way, anyway, he thought to Senthi.

"His friend is at court," Senthi said hastily. "Arin astin Eraday."

Venla stood up, looking dismissive. "I expect you have business to attend to," she said.

"Yes, so I have. Would you know where to find Tarin of the Dawn?"

"He should be in. He's Mighty Servant now."

"Whatever happened to Mernath?"

"Got into trouble in the Pit, it seems. They fished him out of the mud in the Old Harbour with a knife in his back."

"I'd have thought his front," Senthi said, remembering her own first encounter with Mernath. "Below the belt."

"Oh, whoever did it used the knife on his front as well. Cut more than his purse, too."

Senthi couldn't keep from giggling.

"Who is this Mernath and why is it funny that somebody knifed him?" Corin asked when they were safely out of earshot.
"He used to be Mighty Servant here. A little too fond of very young girls-- tried to rape me when I was twelve. I knocked him out then, and I'd have cut his purse if he hadn't been lying on top of it."

Now it was Corin's turn to laugh. "How did you knock him out? The way you taught me?"

"Yes. I didn't really know what I was doing, and I'd only ever done it to people who weren't gifted. I thought I'd killed him."

"Can you kill people with your mind if they're not gifted?"

"I can. I don't know whether you can. I'll show you how so you can try if it's ever necessary."

They were at the door to Tarin's office. "You don't have to come," Senthi said to Corin. "I can imagine you're not all that interested in Temple business." As he turned to leave, Senthi caught his sleeve. "If you go to Lydan's house now, Alaise will make a bed for you. There's no need to sleep anywhere else and pay through the nose."

A young clerk --probably a trade school pupil-- showed her in. Tarin was at Mernath's old desk, sealing papers. "Ah, Senthi," he said, "it's good to see you. Lydan told me that he'd written a letter asking you not to come, and I was afraid I wouldn't get to talk to you. I was about to travel to Veray when Mernath had his... accident... and I was called to the cope."

"It's good to see you too," Senthi said. "I was actually hoping to do business with the Dawn. Do I still need you for that?"

"I turned most of that over to Imri. I'm still nominally in charge of external affairs, but you can imagine this job doesn't leave much time for that."

"Well, yes." She could imagine that very well. "There are some people in Veray who want to make me Mighty Servant. I've held them off until now."

"And will you still be able to hold them off when you go back?"

"Merain is very capable. I have all the influence I want."

Tarin nearly fell off his chair laughing. "You're a very clever woman."
"Thank you. Though I'm afraid I won't be able to resist for ever. Merain is just the kind of man to be kicked upstairs, to Valdis for instance, if they need someone nice and pliable there with some years of service on record."

"Well, before they kick you upstairs, would you be willing to represent the Dawn in Veray?"

"Tarin, I thought you'd never ask."

He took her out to dinner. They had the same table in the Crown where Tarin and Lydan had signed the contract. Only this time the third person at the table wasn't Lydan, but Imri, Tarin's assistant, the effective head of the Dawn since Tarin had been made Mighty Servant. She was not gifted, though that was surprising, because she had everything it took except the gift itself. If she'd been adolescent instead of middle-aged, Senthi would have thought her gifts were about to break through. Perhaps Imri was purposely not allowing it.

"So you're to be our agent in Veray," Imri said. "Do you mind if I send one of my clerks with you? He's in trade school, apprenticed with the Dawn, wants to go south but that's just foolishness of course. It's time he gets some real experience. Besides, there's more that you can teach him and I can't, I think."

"He's gifted?"

"Almost a journeyman in the Guild." She didn't say which one and Senthi didn't ask. If he happened to be in the Guild of the Nameless, she could either do something about that or find other teachers for him. Plenty of both sorts in Veray.

"I'll take him. I've brought in a lot of young people in the past few years. Veray doesn't have a trade school, so they all learn in the Temple."
Chapter 25

The next day Imri sent her clerk to Lydan's house to speak to Senthi. He was a handsome boy in his mid-teens, slim and dark-haired, hauntingly familiar. When he introduced himself as Ainei Radan, Senthi realised why. "Is your mother by any chance Aine the doctor?"

"Yes, she is. --Do you know my mother?"

"We're old friends. First time I saw you I was younger than you are now and you were a baby in a basket."

He frowned unbelievingly, then his face lit up. "You're that Senthi! Mother will be thrilled to see you."

"Well, take me to her, then. I'm going to have to talk to her anyway if I'm to be your master in Veray. At least you're in the right Guild. Imri didn't say."

"I don't think Imri knows the difference, if she even knows there is a difference. Strange, really, I always get the feeling that she could be gifted if she only tried."

"Yes, that's the feeling I got from her as well." They walked to Aine's house, still the same sprawling townhouse with the surgery tacked on to its side. "Did your father ever come back?" Senthi asked.

"A few times. I got two sisters and a little brother out of it. Haven't seen him for six years now, though."
The boy who met them at the door must be the little brother: he looked exactly like Radan, except that he was some ten years younger. "Mother's gone out," he said. "We have to eat cold cabbage."

"Let's eat hot cabbage, shall we? I'm here now. I can cook. And I suppose this lady can cook."

"Can you?" the little boy asked.

"Yes, at least I could last time I tried. Are you Radan's brother? I'm Senthi."

"Mother says not to tell my name to strangers."

"That's very prudent of your mother. May I come in anyway?"

He shrugged. "You're with my brother." He opened the door wider.

In the kitchen there was plenty of cold cabbage, as well as a side of salt pork. As Senthi made to help Radan with the cooking, the door flew open and a girl came in, her arms full of bread. "Alyse is bringing the butter and apples," she said. "I couldn't carry any more. Oh, excuse me." She put the bread on the table. "I didn't know we were having guests. Ainei Rusla, at your service," she said with an exaggerated bow.

"Arnei Senthi. I'm an old friend of your mother's. I think she was pregnant with you when I left for Ildis."

"Ah, explains why I don't know you, then. I thought you might be one of Mother's lame ducks."

This made Radan very indignant. "She's not a lame duck! She's a grand master in the Guild!"

It didn't seem to impress Rusla. "Do you know what to do with leftover cabbage?" she asked Senthi.

"Seeing that there is salt pork and your sister is bringing apples, I could make a fry-up. Will that do?"

"Better than cold cabbage with vinegar, anyway," Rusla said.

"Hey, I like cold cabbage," the little boy protested. "Only I don't like vinegar. It's sour."

"That's what vinegar is for, silly."
The other sister came in then, with butter and apples as Rusla had said. Senthi had last seen her as a delicate little girl; she was still small and delicate, though she was just beginning to acquire curves.

Aine herself was in her wake, looking flustered. When she saw Senthi, she dropped what she was carrying --it seemed to be a bundle of old clothes-- and came to embrace her.

"Where have you been all that time? Yes, I know, in Veray, but you could at least have written."

Senthi laughed. "It's not as if you ever wrote yourself."

"Yes, yes, we've both been busy. I see that my children have taken you over already."

"It's all right-- only they all want me to cook."

"Nonsense. Radan can cook. Alyse, give him the apples." She picked up the bundle and went through the door on the other side, beckoning Senthi to come with her. This was a large bare room that could be a washroom or a scullery, with a table in the middle and a wide sink on one wall. It had its own copper pump with a bucket under it.

"Mind you don't drink that water," Aine said, pointing to the pump. "It comes from under the house. Seven feet deep, not quite enough to sift all the funny taste out. If you want a wash, though, go ahead." She dumped the bundle on the table and began to unwrap it. It revealed a swath of deepest purple velvet. Senthi gasped.

"Pretty, isn't it? Present from a patient. Not that I know what to do with it, unless Radan wants a really fancy jacket. It's not a colour for young girls and I'd need about twice as much for something decent for me. Pity, because I've never seen that colour anywhere else, it's probably from the south."

"Have it made for Radan. For when he goes to Veray."

Aine turned on her heel and stared at Senthi. "That's why you're here?"

"No, it's not why, but I talked to Imri of the Dawn last night and she said she wanted to send her clerk back with me. It just happens that that clerk is Radan."
"Well, I never." She crumpled the velvet in her hands, until Senthi took it from her gently. "I'm glad it's you. I'd feel horrible sending him away with strangers. I know he's practically grown up, but still..."

"I know." Senthi put a hand on Aine's arm. "My boy's gone to sea behind my back."

"Yes, I heard that. Can't remember who told me, probably Lydan. I suppose you came to take him back with you, then, and when you arrived he'd already left?"

"Exactly."

"If you'd found Aidan still here, would you have taken Radan with you as well?"

"Probably, if Imri had asked me. Great Archan, Aine, if I wanted a substitute son I'd have one already. Have you seen my journeyman who followed me from Veray?"

"I've only heard of you being here just now. I missed Radan both times, coming and going, or he'd have told me, I suppose." Aine folded the velvet thoughtfully and wrapped it in the rags again. "It's time for him to leave home, it really is."

Over dinner, which Radan had made very competently with the cabbage and not only pork and apples, but garlic and cumin seeds as well, Senthi told Aine all about Veray. "I think it will be good for Radan," Aine said. "I'm piling far too much on his shoulders here. If only the patients would pay in money once in a while."

"You could take only rich patients," Radan said.

"I'm a doctor, damn it. Not a priestess of Mizran. I treat everyone who needs me. And they pay in cabbages and salt pork and rolls of purple velvet. At least this way I find gifted children before the other Guild does. I probably wouldn't if I took only the rich ones."

"About the purple velvet," Senthi said. "Is your patient the weaver?"

"Yes, an old and cranky weaver, one of ours. You may know him, it's Arvin."
"The one who used to make ribbons? I have a journeyman who may make master here in Essle."

"Yes, that's him. Is it the journeyman you were talking about, or did you bring yet another?"

"The one I was talking about. He's the baron of Veray's son. I taught him back there and couldn't persuade him to stay put when I had to go to Essle. If that weaver is still working, I can take Corin to him tomorrow to take his measure so we'll be prepared."

"He does do little things. The velvet is something he still had from better days-- his eyes are almost gone, and his shoulders, that's what he needs me for. Weaving is not a healthy craft. Especially not if you're over sixty."

"I didn't realise Arvin was that old." She dimly remembered the weaver from Guild meetings, and in her memory he was of an age with Venla.

"Sixty-seven last Midwinter. Speaking of Midwinter, are you staying for the Feast?"

"How long is it? No more than a week or two. Yes, I might as well stay. Lydan will like that. I shouldn't stay in town for long after, though, or the Rycha will be flooded."

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As Senthi was going home, with Radan as an escort --she had found out that the boy was good enough with a dagger to defend himself and she didn't want to injure his pride by telling him that he didn't have to defend her-- they passed the old training field of the Order of the Sworn, where Ruzyn had died. Senthi tensed when she saw it.

"Are you all right?" Radan asked.

"You're very perceptive. Yes, I'm all right, only I fought here once and my best friend was killed. It still gives me the shivers."

There was a light on the other side, and when Senthi looked closer she saw that there were people there. Corin was one, and there was a master in the Guild of Archan who Senthi was sure she had seen somewhere but
couldn't put a name to. The other two were in the Guild of the Nameless, one almost a master like Corin, the other a very young journeyman who showed promise to grow into a grand master. The light, she realised, was his doing. She stood still.

"What is it?" Apparently Radan couldn't see as clearly as she could.

"It's my journeyman and some of the enemy. I think they're setting up for a fight."

"Can we watch?"

"It's my duty to, I think. Yes, you can. Just don't meddle. If any meddling is necessary, I'm the one to do it."

They went over to the other side of the field. Corin and the almost-master in the Guild of the Nameless were circling, setting up a perimeter for a formal fight. Good work, Senthi thought to Corin. I'm here if you need me.

"Hurry up, you two," the young journeyman said. "If you dawdle any longer you'll have to fight in the dark. I can't keep this up forever."

"Shall I take over?" Senthi asked.

The boy looked at her disdainfully. "Of course not," he said. "He's my brother."

"The other one is my journeyman. I have as much right as you."

"All right, if you must. They'll only have more light."

Senthi made another light on the near side, throwing the fighting area into sharp perspective. The protective circle was almost finished. The seconds were inside it, unlike at Rovan's fight. Senthi could see clearly through the protection, but she wondered whether Radan would.

"Can you see anything?" she asked him.

"Not everything. It's clouded. Did Valain throw the protection?"

"Which one is Valain?"

"The little one with red hair."

"No, it was his brother and my journeyman."

204
"Then Valain's brother has been taking lessons from him. It's his style. I hope I'll get to fight him before he's too strong for me." He was suddenly very fierce, burning with eagerness.

"If I take you to Veray you probably won't be back before he's too strong for you. I wouldn't be surprised if he's too strong for you now."

"I was afraid he would be. Perhaps I should challenge him to find out."

"Your mother wouldn't forgive me."

"Aw, you're right." He sighed and hunched his shoulders. Not sullen; it looked like grim determination not to shame either Aine or Senthi. He's a good boy, Senthi thought.

The combatants had finished their circle. It stood out clearly, shining palely in the glow of the globes of light that Valain and Senthi had made. Neither of them seemed to be armed. Corin's sword and a knife that must belong to Valain's brother lay on the ground outside the circle. They had weapons of a sort in their hands, though: made of ryst, solidified energy. Senthi had taught that to Corin herself, but she still admired his command of the technique.

They fought for a long time, silently, with matching fierce looks on their faces. Corin had the longer reach, but the other young man was faster, lighter on his feet. Their weapons changed size as needed, sometimes looking like swords, sometimes like daggers.

Radan stood beside Senthi with clenched fists, so tense that Senthi could feel it through the distance that separated them. He followed every move with his mind as well as his eyes, straining to see through the protection. Sweat ran down his face and into his collar. When Senthi put a hand on his shoulder, he started.

Don't strain yourself.

I want to see. Look, Valain's brother is winning.

The wiry young man did indeed seem to be winning; Corin was wavering and at times he lost his ryst weapon altogether. Corin's second was fidgeting, about to lose patience, it seemed. When Valain's brother came within his reach a knife glittered in his hand. He threw it. It buried itself in Valain's brother's back to the hilt.
The protection dropped. Corin dropped as well, probably with exhaustion. Valain ran to his brother and went down on his knees. The light he'd made went out.

"He's dead! You've killed him!"

"Not yet," Senthi said in a voice that she could barely control. She was having a hard time not to relive what had happened when she'd fought here, years ago. "Naigha hasn't come for him."

At that same moment Naigha did come. It was clear that Valain saw her as well as Senthi did. Radan, too, saw at least something: he looked up wonderingly.

Senthi hid her face in her hands, waiting for Naigha's mantle to pass. Valain jumped up from where he sat next to his brother's body and scrambled for the knife. Senthi reached to pick it up before he could. "Don't kill him in revenge. It's bad enough already, don't make it worse."

She stood in front of Corin's second, fixing him to the spot with her mind. "I should really call Venla now," she said. "Come to think of it, I will call Venla. You violated the rules of formal combat. You brought a weapon into the circle when the contestants themselves were unarmed. You killed someone on his trial when you were not the one fighting him."

She reached out to Venla and woke her up from sleep. Venla was not amused. You handle it. Kill him if you must.

Yes, I think I must. She held the knife up between herself and Corin's second. "The penalty for any of those three is death." It was not completely correct --in fact only killing someone on his trial carried the death penalty-- but close enough for her purposes. "So die."

At the last moment, she didn't use the knife but thrust into the man's mind with hers. Venla had appointed her, after all: she was entitled. Corin's second gasped and fell at her feet. Naigha must still have been close; she was there at once.

Across the body Senthi could see Valain's horrified face, deathly white around his freckles. She sensed that Corin and Radan behind her were equally horrified. Good. Let them learn.
"Get the priestesses, please, Radan," she said.

"Why couldn't I kill him?" Valain shouted. "I'd have had my revenge and he'd still have been dead. Why did you have to do it? Who are you, anyway?"

"Arnei Senthi, head of the Guild of Archan in Veray," Senthi said. "Acting as Venla's proxy. I have the authority to dispense justice."

"Justice!" It came out as a snarl. "There's no justice except revenge. Especially not with you." Senthi knew it was the Guild he meant, not her personally, but it chilled her nevertheless.

"We keep to the rules just like you," Senthi said. "What do you do if one of you kills someone on his trial, except in the fight itself?"

"We don't do that kind of thing."

"Never? Well, what if someone did do it? Wouldn't you have to kill them?"

Valain shuffled his feet. "I don't know."

"I can forgive you that, you're not a master yet. By the time you're ready, you'll know all right. And you will deal out justice."

"I won't go around killing people in cold blood."

"No, your blood runs too hot for that," Senthi said. "You'd better go home now and tell Alaise what happened. Unless she was looking in, of course."

"What do you know of Alaise?"

"That she is a midwife, but also a grand master, and as such likely to be your master and the head of your Guild. Go. Tell her. Your brother doesn't need you now." Senthi thrust the knife in the sand to clean it and handed it to Valain. "Take that. It may need cleaning with more than sand."

Valain took the knife gingerly and put it in his belt. As he turned to leave, Radan appeared on the other side of the field, with not only a priestess of Naigha but Aine as well. Valain hesitated, but Senthi gave him a shove in the ribs. "Go."

"I want to bring him to the Temple."
"Fair enough. Well, stay, then."

Aine came up to where the dead bodies still lay. "Don't need me any more, do they?"

"I didn't think they would need you," Radan said, "I thought Corin might, or Valain."

"So, did you think I was going to hurt him?" Senthi asked.

"He might have hurt himself. He's very impetuous."

"I've noticed. Well, he's in one piece. Corin, what about you?"

Corin, it appeared, was only exhausted. "Does your father-in-law have any vervain tea in the house?" Aine asked.

"I have my own with me," Senthi took Corin by the arm and led him home. Radan, after some hesitation, went with his mother.

Vervain tea and Senthi's undivided attention restored Corin's spirits a little. He sat at the kitchen table, shivering. Everybody else in the house was already in bed.

"I failed," he said over and over again. "I could have been a master. I failed the trial."

"Your second --I don't know who he was and it doesn't matter now-- spoiled your trial. It's not your fault. You will get another chance. We'll go to the weaver tomorrow. Before we leave Essle you will be a master, I'm sure of that."

"How? Nobody will second me now. Nobody will fight me now."

"I'm sure Valain would fight you if he had the chance," Senthi said. "And I'll second you. You can be sure that I am not likely to break any rules. Anyway, a fight is not the only way to take a trial. I can set up something for you. You're more than ready for it."

Senthi got Corin into bed eventually. She wrapped him in protection like a blanket and sat at his side well into the small hours, thinking. She was no Venla who could convince a whole house to do her bidding, putting illusions on every room and doorway to test one person. The house wasn't even hers, however much Lydan urged her to make it her home. She'd have to do something else for Corin.
I'll sleep on it, she thought. Ask old Arvin the weaver, if I can't come up with something myself.
Chapter 26

Both Senthi and Corin slept late the next morning. The washing water Alaise had brought was cold when Senthi got up and wanted to use it. She took the jug to the kitchen, expecting Corin to be up and having breakfast, but there was only Alaise's eldest daughter, washing pots.

"Morning. Can I have some warm water, please?"

"Sure. Could you help with the kettle? It's too heavy for me to lift."

Senthi filled the jug while the girl held it. "Shouldn't you be in school?" she asked.

The girl shrugged. "I went this morning and the master didn't come in. Then his brother came to say he'd got himself killed. In a fight." She said it as if it was the most normal thing in the world for schoolmasters to get killed in fights.

"Was your master old or young?" Senthi asked.

"Young, and ever so handsome. His brother is even better. I wish he'd noticed me."

Senthi raised an eyebrow. The girl couldn't be more than nine years old. They did grow up fast in Essle. She was practically sure now that the schoolmaster had been Valain's brother. One more test. "Do you know his brother's name?"
"No, I don't really remember. But it's something like a king. Not the king, he isn't called Athal like the king who just died, but it reminds me of kings."

"Could it be Valain?"

"Yes! That's what it is. The brother, I mean. The master's name is --was, I should say-- Fian."

And I never knew the name of the man I killed. But the same instant she did know. She had seen him twice before: the first time on that same field. Lysei Rhun. The man who had killed Ruzyn. Her blood ran cold.

She finished washing her face and put the jug on the counter. Perhaps she should go and see Hylse, or whoever was commander of the Order now. She wondered how long it had taken them to get to the scene this time; there had been no sign of them when they'd left. "When Corin comes down, tell him I had to go into town and I'll see him later. I can find him if he's not here."

"Right. Are you sure you don't want breakfast first?"

Senthi hadn't thought of that, but she noticed now that she was hungry. "I'll take some of that bread and cheese with me, if you don't mind."

Hylse was on the training ground, sparring with what looked like a bunch of new recruits. Senthi watched them for a while. She knew that Hylse had noticed her, though the commander showed no sign of it. Her hands itched to take her sword out and join in the training.

Hylse took on the rest of the young people one by one, seven of them, before she turned to Senthi. "Have you come to train with us?" she asked.

"You've noticed? No, to talk to you."

"About the fight last night, I suppose."

"Yes. I was surprised that you didn't turn up as you did when I fought on that field."

"That's years ago." She accepted a towel from one of the recruits, a mug of water from another. "The field is no longer ours."
"It isn't? Aren't you supposed to investigate every *semsin* fight in town? Isn't that your job?"

Hylse drank some of the water, upended the mug over her head and dried herself. "If we had to be on the spot immediately after every fight, we'd need about six times as many people. Not that we're not expanding." She waved her hand at the group of recruits, who were now sparring among themselves. "But yes, we did send several people to talk to witnesses. In fact someone is on his way to see you now. You must have missed him."

"He'll catch Corin when he comes out of bed. Damn, I'd have wanted to be there."

"I'll ask him to bring Corin here. We can talk to both of you at the same time then." Her eyes glazed over for a moment.

Presently, a youngish master appeared with a sullen-looking Corin in tow. They all squeezed into Hylse's little office.

"I understand that you" --she looked at Corin-- "met Fian of the Guild of Anshen last night and the two of you decided to engage in formal combat."

"It wasn't like that," Corin protested. "Rhun took me to some places, and he noticed that I'm almost a master. He said he knew someone for me to fight. And then he took me to the Drunken Seahorse to meet Fian."

"All right, so you met Fian at the Drunken Seahorse. How did you decide to use the old training field?"

"Fian wanted to fight then and there but Valain said it should be done properly or it wouldn't be a master's trial, it would just be a fight."

"Fian's brother? He was also there?"

"Well, they live at the Drunken Seahorse. Their father is the landlord."

"Hmm. He was partly right. It's usually more effective as a trial if it's done with the formalities. Either of you --both of you, perhaps-- could have passed the trial if you had simply fought, though. It's possible that Valain didn't know that."
"Valain is at an age to insist on formalities," Senthi said. She had seen too many junior clerks in the Temple of Mizran not to know that.

"That, too. Anyway, you went to the old training field."

"Yes. It belongs to the inn now. To Fian and Valain's father, that is."

"Yes, I know that," Hylse said. "We sold it to him to build a storehouse on, quite recently."

"So we decided to set up a circle, and for Rhun to second me and Valain to second Fian. No weapons. Valain made a light."

"Rhun broke the no-weapons rule," Senthi said.

"So he did," Hylse said, "and that's reason enough for us to investigate. We probably wouldn't have bothered with a normal master's duel, even if one of the duellists had been killed. That's a matter for the Temple of Naigha."

"Nobody was killed in the duel," Senthi said.

"No, Rhun killed Fian, unlawfully, and you killed Rhun. Lawfully, by the way you handle the law, I take it?" Hylse sounded the slightest bit sarcastic. "Or was it private revenge?"

So Hylse remembered too. "I took it up with Venla and she said that I should deal with it and kill him if I must. I didn't know who it was at the time, only that he'd committed a capital offence."

Hylse sighed. "If you must, you must. We would have taken him in for questioning."

"And killed him later?"

Hylse didn't answer that. "Corin," she said, disregarding the fact that she'd only heard his name from others, "would you have killed Fian in the duel?"

"Well, maybe." A blush crept into his face. "If it had come to that. I didn't think about it, not at the time. Anyway, he was winning."

"Did you give any signal to your second?"
"I didn't have time for that!" He got to his feet and put his hands on Hylse's desk. "I was fighting." The young master pushed him back into his chair gently.

"I believe you. You can go. Senthi, stay, please."

*Go home, I'll be along,* Senthi thought to Corin. He stood up uncertainly, looked around and left. The young master went out after him and closed the door.

"Tell me," Hylse said when the men had gone, "why doesn't your Guild have a body like ours? To investigate things that go wrong? This is the second time you've been in my office. The third time, if we count the fight on the same field when I wasn't commander yet."

"There probably isn't room for two. It would only mean more fighting. Ildis has the Royal Guards, but there's no Order of the Sworn there. The Royal Guards wouldn't allow it. They have control of the town. As you have here, I suppose."

"Control is a big word," Hylse said. "We keep a check on what happens, but we can't keep track of every little thing. And we usually leave your business to you if none of ours are involved."

"Naturally," Senthi said. "When I was living here, Venla used to take care of that kind of business if none of yours were involved. For all I know she still does that when she can't palm it off on another grand master instead of getting out of bed in the middle of the night."

"For all I know too. But Venla is only one woman, and I don't know of any apprentice or journeyman of yours in Essle who has what it takes to be a grand master."

"Whereas you have at least one. Little Valain."

"Don't let him hear you call him little."

Senthi remembered Rovan calling her "the little priestess" when she'd crept into his room, running away from the Temple. Granted, she'd been younger then than Valain was now, and barely an apprentice. "All right, young Valain. He did very well with that light."

"Yes, that's one of his strong points."
"He has some weak points then?"
"Do you think I'm going to tell you?"

Senthi got up, with a grin, and left.

Corin was waiting on the bridge, leaning on the railing. "I told you to go home," Senthi said.
"I didn't want you to have to go alone."
"I grew up here. I'm not in any danger."
"Still." He bit his lip. "I didn't want to go alone. I wanted to talk to you, too."
"Without Alaise and all those children around. I understand. Well, talk."
"It's just--" He took a deep breath. "Do you think I'll ever be a master now? With the trial all screwed up?"
"Of course you'll be a master. You didn't screw it up. That Rhun of yours did."
"He's not mine."
"He was your second. You should choose your helpers more carefully."
"I didn't exactly choose him. He chose himself, more or less."
"Well, let's not dwell on it. We have a weaver to see."

*=*

The weaver Arvin lived in Blue Bridges, almost opposite the bath-house that Rovan had taken Senthi to. It seemed half a lifetime ago.

Arvin's house was almost triangular, a very narrow front widening out to a large workshop at the back. He was in the workshop, but not working; he sat on a low bench near the back door, which was open despite the cool weather.

"I've been expecting you," he said, without getting up or even turning, when Senthi and Corin came in.

"Both of us?" Senthi asked.
"You and some journeyman, at least." Arvin raised himself from the bench slowly and carefully. Senthi could almost feel the pain it must cause him. She reached out a hand to support him, but he waved it away. "If I can't get up by myself you might as well call the priestesses." He walked to the worktable in one corner. It was full of assorted objects: small tools, reels of yarn, a little hand-loom, a bottle that looked as if it came from Aine and contained medicine.

"You've come for the ribbon, I take it." Arvin took a reel of red yarn from the table and handed Corin the end. "We'll take your measure. Hold that for a moment."

Senthi had never seen this done before. Venla had had the ribbon ready for her; there had been no need to go to the weaver to have her measure taken. She intended to talk to Arvin about that later. He was too busy now. He passed the red thread over Corin's head and back under his feet, laboriously because of his stiffness. Where the thread passed a line of power became visible: Corin's own anea that attached itself to the yarn.

When the reel met the end Corin was holding, Arvin took both ends in one hand. "Thank you. You can let go now."

Corin let go of the end in his hand and stepped off the thread under his feet. The power stayed in the thread, rather than around Corin as if it were protection. Arvin snipped the thread with a small pair of scissors. Corin winced.

"Sorry. Should have been more careful. I used to be able to do that without people even noticing. Took your measure all the way from here," Arvin said, looking at Senthi.

"I was wondering about that. Venla certainly never took me to see you."

"No, Venla wants to do everything on her own. Couldn't do this without me, though. I've never noticed that she could weave at all. Hand me that yellow reel, one of you, will you?" He strung the hand-loom with the red thread. It was still shimmering faintly.
Corin was too stunned to move, let alone pick something up, so Senthí handed Arvin the reel of yellow yarn. The weaver threaded a bobbin with it and moved it back and forth almost too fast to see. In no time the red was covered with yellow. Arvin snipped off the ends and tucked them into the weaving with a needle. "Here you are." He gave the ribbon to Senthí, but looked at Corin as he did it. "It won't be long," he said. "The power is already there."

They started to walk home in silence. Senthí had the ribbon in her purse. Even through leather and cloth she could feel Corin's anea pulsing.

Arvin had been right: the power was already there. Now for a way to free it, to give it to Corin to use.

"Do you mind if I set something up for you?" she asked. "If we don't wait for the trial to happen?"

"Aren't you supposed to?" He was genuinely surprised. "Isn't that what a master is for?"

"Well, Venla set it up for me, but most people I've seen taking their master's trial were kind of caught up in it. Either a fight that would have happened anyway, or a formal fight like the one that didn't work with you, or some situation that needed to be resolved. Or the gods taking a hand, of course."

"I don't think we can persuade the gods to take a hand," Corin said. He was almost himself again.

"I'll see what I can do." Senthí didn't think she had any influence with the gods, but she could always try to play deity herself. Not like Venla --that wasn't her style, and she wouldn't want to do it to Lydan's house anyway-- but there must be some way to give Corin a challenge worthy of his ability.
Chapter 27

Senthí slept on it. In the morning she went to see Valain. He was on the roof of the Drunken Seahorse, mending a shutter. He stood out like a beacon. "You should keep that brightness down," Senthí said.

"Why? Everybody knows us."

Senthí didn’t have an answer to that. The boy was right, of course. "Do you still want revenge? I have a proposal for you."

He jumped off the roof and landed at her feet with an elegant leap. "Can I fight?"

"You can fight Corin for me. He needs his trial completed. I know that you’re only just a journeyman and he is nearly a master, but I’m confident that you’re up to it."

Valain looked doubtful. "It wasn't him who killed Fian," he said.

"You can't fight the one who did."

"What if I kill him?"

"That's the risk of a trial," Senthí said. "Or he might kill you. I don't suppose you're any good with a sword?"

"No, I'm not. Knife I'm good at. Or I'll wrestle him."

Wrestle him? Corin was more than a head taller than Valain and must be twice his weight. Well, apparently the boy knew what he was doing. "Let's go and get him out of bed."
Corin was in fact out of bed already, dressed in only his shirt and eating a large breakfast. When Alaise saw Valain, she put a plate of food in front of him as well. "You need some more flesh on you," she said. "Doesn't your mother feed you?"

"Haven't got a mother," Valain said around a mouthful of bread and fried sausage. "Any more. Not since I was a baby."

Corin and Valain looked at one another like tomcats who happen to be fed in the same kitchen. Corin finished first and wiped his mouth on his shirtsleeve.

*Does he want me to apologise or something?*

*On the contrary. He comes to settle.*

"Settle, eh?" Corin stood up and walked around the table to tower over Valain. Valain was easy to tower over, especially when he was sitting down. "Yes, I'll settle. Rhun made it impossible to fight your brother, but I'll gladly fight you instead."

Valain grinned, still with his mouth full. Corin's face set in angry lines. Apparently Valain had spoken to his mind, and Corin didn't like what he had said.

"I'll get the little..." He caught himself, taking a deep breath. "Yes, I do want to fight you. You choose the weapon."

"No weapons," Valain said. "Or do you prefer knives?"

"I'll settle for bare hands," Corin said. He had never been really good with a knife or a dagger, except those made of *ryst*. That was one thing that Senthi, despite all her efforts, hadn't been able to teach him.

They decided to have the fight in the same field again, on the same spot if they could find it. Some of the residual *anea* must still be there. In this, Valain could really stand in for his brother.

"I'll need a second," Valain said. "Mind if I call Perain?"

"Call him by all means," Senthi said. She was surprised that she found herself looking forward to seeing Perain again.

When they arrived at the old training ground Perain was already there, pacing out Corin and Fian's circle. It was true, then, that the power was
still lingering. Valain went to talk to him. Clearly, Perain was worried or angry or both. Understandable, of course, and irrelevant at this time.

"You should have let him challenge you," Senthi said to Corin. "Not you him."

"I thought I was letting him."

"You said that you'd fight him. He took that as a challenge, never mind that you didn't mean it like that."

"The little..."

*Don't let him hear you call him 'little'.* Valain and Perain had finished their argument or whatever it was and were coming over to them.

Perain acknowledged Senthi with a nod and a mental note, *Talk to you later.* "You will understand," he said to Corin and Valain, "that this is to be a contest of the mind primarily. Valain has proposed to use the Town Games rules. Two falls out of three, surrender or a clear victory to be decided by the judges. Do you agree?"

"We don't have any judges," Corin said.

"That's a valid point. As it is impossible to get any impartial judges, I propose that it should be decided by both seconds unanimously."

*Pompous fool.* "Yes, I can abide by that," Senthi said.

It started to rain. "Any of you order that?" Valain said, scowling at the sky.

"Not me," Senthi said. "Can you do weather as well as light?"

"Less well, but I'll try." He spread out his hands, making an almost invisible dome of power appear above their heads. Most of the raindrops ran off it, but some got through. "See? Not at all reliable. And I'm going to have to fight in a moment. We'll all get wet after all."

"Can you do that?" Corin whispered to Senthi.

"I don't know. I've never tried."

Perain glared at his pupil and the rain fell straight down again. The glare said, as clearly as if Perain had used the words, *Stop showing off, you'll need your strength.*
Valain and Corin set about making the protective circle. It looked as though it didn't take much effort. Perain came to stand beside Senthi. "It's still there, really," he said. "Nobody took the thing down properly."

"Half of it was Corin's already," Senthi said. "Should we go in before they close it?"

"I think we should stay out," Perain said. "If we don't want to get hit by stray missiles. Valain can be very... boisterous."

The young men closed the circle. Rain fell steadily; the circle deflected it. "He's doing it again," Perain said, shaking his head.

"He can probably work better without the rain falling on him," Senthi said. "I can imagine. It doesn't give him an advantage, they'll both profit."

"That's true." They watched without speaking as the young men felt one another out, using barely visible tendrils of power. Corin was the first to strike, with something that looked like lightning. Senthi stifled a small gasp. It reminded her of the times that she'd struck out in anger and fear herself. *Don't use your anger before its time,* she thought, but the thought didn't get through the barrier.

Valain countered Corin's strike with a shining shield that he held between his hands. It looked for all the world like a dinner plate, but it caught and reflected the bolt. It hit Corin full in the stomach on the rebound and he doubled over with the force of it. Valain waited until he had collected himself. He said something that Senthi couldn't understand; probably just an enquiry whether Corin was all right.

Corin tried another bolt, bouncing it off the wall of protection this time. Valain rolled out of its way. It wasn't long until both of them were throwing arrows of force about, sometimes obscuring Senthi's view because they caused the protective circle to flare up with bright light.

"See? That's why I wanted to keep out." Perain's voice sounded as if he was enjoying it immensely. Senthi was less enthusiastic. She couldn't see how well Corin was doing. Most of the spectacle seemed to come from Valain.

There was a pause. Valain made a small opening in the circle. "One fall. His. We're not counting that first strike, it didn't really throw him."
They went on, with doubled effort. The protection was almost opaque now. Whether it was from something inside or because Valain was keeping vision as well as rain out, Senthi couldn't determine. The combatants were shadowy figures that moved as if in a dream. Slowly, too, like swimmers, but that might be an illusion because of the shadowiness.

"They're getting tired," Perain said. "We haven't had the second fall yet." Just at that moment the opening appeared again. Senthi could see now that it was the fighting ground itself that was filled with --what?-- opacity, a lack of vision. "I fell this time," Valain said. "Next one down loses." He closed the barrier again.

"What is he doing?" Senthi asked Perain.

"He's working with light. It's what he does best."

Senthi hadn't seen Corin through the opening, but she'd caught a fleeting tendril of thought. He's strong. Well, so was Corin strong. He was almost a master, and Valain barely a journeyman. That Valain was to be a grand master would only make the fight less unequal.

But at that age Corin hadn't been nearly as strong as Valain was now. The enemy was still doing better. Two grand masters of the Guild of the Nameless in Essle in a few years, when there would only be one of the Guild of Archan when Senthi went back to Veray. She clenched her fists, feeling the nails gouge into her palms.

"What's the matter?" That was Perain's voice, sounding worried. "You look upset. You're all white as well."

"Nothing. I was thinking." Perain didn't have to know how angry she was, especially as she wasn't sure she knew the full reason for her anger herself. Perhaps it wasn't even that the enemy was stronger, but that she, Senthi, couldn't do anything about it.

On the fighting ground the protection fell away. So did Valain's rain shield. It was raining relentlessly on Valain, who was sitting on the ground upright, and on Corin, who was lying down. Both were unharmed, but exhausted. There was still a blanket of darkness covering them. "You
do it, Corin," Valain said. "Finish your trial." Corin sat up weakly and waved at the darkness, looking very surprised when it went away.

"Hey, that was easy," he said.

Valain shrugged. "Ought to be. You're a master now."

Later, much later, when Corin had dragged himself home and bathed and slept and was eating a very large meal, Senthi took the yellow ribbon out of her pocket. "Here, you deserve this."

"Thank you." He held the ribbon by one end as if it was a worm. "What do I do with it?"

"Keep it safe, somewhere about your body. I have a little pocket sewn into all my shifts to carry mine in. Don't ever let the enemy get hold of it, or anyone you don't trust as much as you trust yourself. There's a little bit of you in it, and anyone who has it has power over you. Some masters keep their pupils' ribbons, but I'm not going to do that. I have power enough over you without it."

Corin looked at her with a frown, as if he was trying to find out whether she was joking. He must have decided that she was, because he grinned and put the ribbon somewhere under his shirt.

"Well, we can go back to Veray now," Senthi said. "I've done my business and you have had your trial. Your father will be pleased."

In the end it was a long time before they went back to Veray. First there was the Feast of Naigha. Lydan wanted to go to the Temple and Senthi couldn't avoid going along. She made herself as inconspicuous as possible, almost to the point of having people bump into her because they simply didn't see her, but that didn't make her any less uncomfortable. The High Priestess here was a tall forbidding-looking woman of indeterminate old age, so much like Airyn that Senthi felt eleven again. The markings on her hands burned under the protection that hid them.

Lydan took her distress for grief and did his best to comfort her. "We'll get used to it," he said. "Work helps a lot."

"Yes, it does," Senthi said.
After the Feast there were weeks on end of abominable weather: sleet that made the bridges and streets treacherously slippery, storms that brought more sleet and ice-cold rain. Then the Rycha came into spate early. Clearly the eastern mountains had had a lot of snow. It would be impossible to reach Tilis, let alone Veray, until the river settled down.

Late in spring they could leave Essle at last. Radan was with them, newly a journeyman, dressed like a prince in the purple velvet. Lydan hugged Senthi as if he was her own father.

"If --when-- Aidan comes back," Senthi said, "tell him he's welcome if he wants to come to Veray. I don't want to make him come." *I can't make him come anyway. I may have power over Corin and Radan and the whole Guild of Archan in Veray, but not over my own son.*
Chapter 28

The Mighty Servant of Veray sat at her desk and looked around the room. It was the same room she had been in almost every day when Merain was still Mighty Servant, the room he had died in, that he had worked himself to death in. Still, it was different now that it was hers.

There was a knock at the door. "Come in." A young clerk stood in the doorway, not sure whether to come further. "Come in, I said."

"Madam--"

"Senthi is the name. You know that, you've been calling me by it as long as you've been here. I haven't changed just because I've become Mighty Servant."

"Senthi, then. There's a messenger from the castle. You're to come at once. Lord Laran is dying."

A chill ran over Senthi's back. She hadn't heard of him being ill. "What happened?"

"Fell off his horse, the messenger says."

"Tell the messenger I'm coming. And tell Radan to finish this." She left the books open, the papers in plain sight. Radan would know what to make of them.

She met the messenger at the temple gate, one of the current crop of noble children. He was thin and pale with freckles and a mop of curly red hair. "Velain?" she asked.
"Yes, can you tell?"

"You look a lot like Raneth who was in that livery years ago."

"Raneth is my aunt. Do you know her? She's here."

Senthi hadn't known that. Laran needed her first, anyway. She took a Temple horse and followed the boy up to the castle. Laran was lying on a pallet in the little side hall, Corin at his side.

"Senthi! Good to see you. We didn't dare carry him upstairs."

Senthi knelt next to Corin and took one of Laran's hands in hers. He seemed unconscious, but his mind was busy, trying to get through. *Too bad that he isn't gifted.* She'd never been able to communicate with Laran mind to mind, though they had been friends for years.

"He broke his back," Corin said. "We were coming back from Gralen and his horse shied and threw him. I couldn't do anything." He was openly crying now. Senthi laid a hand on his shoulder. *No, you can't do anything about acts of the gods. You must be strong and take over his work.*

Laran made a small sound and seemed to try to move. Senthi covered her face so she wouldn't see Naigha's mantle pass.

Corin stood up. He seemed to have grown taller still, though that was hardly possible in his mid-twenties. "Call the priestesses," he said.

Senthi helped Corin get everything in order, letters to all kinds of authorities, not the least to the queen to ask her to confirm Corin as the new baron. They went over the barony's books. Laran had taught Corin well: there was little he didn't know. "What will happen to trade?" he asked.

"The people will need some time to get used to a new baron. You can expect things to be quiet for a season or so. When they have come to know and trust you, everything should get back to normal. Half a year at most. The wine fair won't suffer much unless you're already getting stock in."

"Well, we are, in fact. Can't you put some rumours out at the Temple that everything will be going on the same way?"
"Yes, I can do that."

Corin looked grateful, but also worried. "I'll probably have to put off the wedding as well."

"Midsummer, isn't it?"

"Yes. Tylse's parents didn't want her to marry too young or we'd have done it years ago."

"It's nine weeks away. Get married by all means. By that time the town is going to need a celebration."

It was very late when Senthi left the castle. She had the letters with her to find messengers for in the Temple. As she was picking her way by lantern-light over the treacherously slippery road down the hill she saw someone coming up. Someone she knew, though they had last seen each other when they were both much younger.

"You're too late, Raneth."

"I was afraid I would be. I had to hear it from someone my nephew told it to. Everybody who is halfway gifted in the castle is in the Guild of the Nameless and they sure aren't going to tell me." She paused, looking at Senthi in the dim light of the lantern. "It's you! Senthi!"

"The same. Didn't you expect me still to be here?"

"Are you still something high up in the Temple of Mizran?"

"As high up as one can get, in fact. I'm the Mighty Servant these days."

"Do I congratulate you? Congratulations. I can only boast of being twenty-seventh in line to the throne. Used to be twenty-fifth, but my cousin had twins last year and they're closer."

"You don't have a light-- do you want mine?"

"And leave you to slip on the stones and break your neck as well, like the poor baron? No, I'll find it, thank you. I did this almost every night for three years, I should still know it." She disappeared into the night. Senthi watched her for a while. Still slight and red-haired, still impetuous, a full journeyman in the Guild of the Nameless now, soon to be a master.

She shivered in the chilly air and continued on her way. Back in town, she went to the Temple first. As she had thought, nobody was working. It

227
was only in the few weeks before and after the wine fair that people worked until midnight. She sat in her office, the letters from Corin in front of her, thinking.

The queen would confirm Corin as baron, Senthi didn't have any doubt about that. She might even come to Veray herself to do it. If she did come, there would be great opportunities for trade and for getting to know people. They should be prepared for that. Not only the Temple, but Corin as well. And the Guild: there would be a great crowd of Brun and Velain. Fighting the queen's entourage was out of the question, unless the followers of the Nameless provoked them.

Senthi dipped a quill in the inkhorn and started to write. She couldn't sleep anyway: she was too full of Laran's death. Stray thoughts ran through her mind --*what if he didn't fall, but was pushed?*-- but she ignored them. Corin had no reason at all to want to succeed to the barony before his time.

*Unless he needs it to impress Tylse Eraday.* But the marriage had been arranged already, and Corin said they'd have married years ago if her parents had allowed it. And Senthi would surely have noticed something strange about Corin if he had been guilty of his father's death.

She worked feverishly, trying to clear her mind. She'd liked Laran. Loved him, perhaps, though she'd never allowed him to pay court to her. There was nothing wrong with Corin, but the son was by no means a substitute for the father. Worry kept her awake until first light, when she couldn't stand it any more and went out to breathe the morning air.

As she got back to her office Radan was there, going through the papers on her desk. "Have you been in already?" he asked. "That's a lot of work you've done."

"Yes, I worked all night in fact, I couldn't sleep anyway. Did you know that Laran died?"

"It's all through the town now. I thought you were at the castle."

"You could have looked for me, you know," Senthi said.

"I did. You were hiding."
"Was I?" She hadn't noticed, but it didn't surprise her. She had been in so much distress --more than she'd realised-- that she had fallen back on her old habit. She shook her head. "Get the Guild book, will you?"

Senthi went over the papers with Radan, making sure that he could handle the rest of the work, then went home to sleep or at least to try. It was broad daylight and the smith was working. *I should really find another place to live. I can afford it now.* The representative of the Dawn, let alone the Mighty Servant, shouldn't be living in rented lodgings. In fact she had never cared where she lived; she was hardly ever at home except to sleep and change clothes anyway. But other people, people important enough that she should care about their preferences, might mind.

Trying to sleep didn't seem to work. She got up and went house-hunting.

It was lucky that Veray wasn't fashionable any more now that the queen had set up her winter quarters in Turenay. They said that she was in fragile health after the birth of the little princess and had gone to take the waters. Turenay was only slightly more than a day's ride away, but many of Veray's rich had moved there for the season, or even permanently, rather than going back and forth while the queen was there.

That same afternoon Senthi found three houses she liked. "I'd like you to come with me to have a look," she said to Radan. "I could offer you a room if you want it."

"It can only be better than what I've got," he said. He had a very small room in the attic of a rather questionable inn and it wasn't uncommon for him to be turned out to sleep in the passage if the inn was over-full.

When they came to the house in the Old Market, facing the fencing ground, with a large window in the upstairs back room, both of them knew that this was the right one. "Can I have the room with the light?" Radan asked. "I'd be able to take up painting again."

Senthi had never known that he painted. Come to think of it she had seen him going around with a slate or a notebook, scribbling, but she had assumed it to be numbers, not pictures. "What do you paint?"
"People. I could do a portrait of you." He showed her some of his sketches. She recognised priests from the Temple and also herself, obviously thinking. Some of the firmness of her inner being came through in the picture, hard edges barely masked by a veneer of culture.

"Do one like that and I'll buy it," she said.

She bought the picture when it was finished and hung it in the dining room of the new house. It was strange to have a house twice the size of Lydan's house in Essle all to herself, with only Radan occupying one room and a few servants living in. She liked not having to use her office in the Temple, or public places, or rooms belonging to other people, when she wanted to do Guild work or to entertain clients of the Dawn. Still, she felt as though she had turned into Venla.

Her front room was to all intents and purposes a temple of Archan. She tended the fire there herself whenever she could, leaving it at most to Radan but never to the servants if she could help it. By Midsummer she was enough at home in the new house that she could have the Guild meeting and party there. Now she really felt like Venla, with her house full of people.

Corin, his new wife Tylse Eraday and Tylse's brother Arin arrived late, escaped from the wedding. "We thought we could get away now," Corin said with a grin, "everybody is eating and drinking, they're not going to miss us. Did we miss anything at the meeting?"

"Nothing you didn't know already," Senthi said. "Unless you somehow missed that you've become baron."

Corin and Tylse took everybody back up to the castle towards midnight for the bonfire. Corin had been right: they hadn't been missed yet. Some of the wedding guests, wine cups in hand, were wandering aimlessly around the pile of firewood, apparently wondering when --or whether-- someone would come to light it.

As Senthi lit the spark in the heart of the pile, calling fire into existence from nothing, the presence of Archan appeared to her. My faithful servant. She waited for the god to say more, but there was only heavy silence.
Radan's face changed, like a dog pricking up its ears. You noticed that, didn't you? Senth asked him.

I've never seen him that close.

You're almost a master. We'll go to the weaver tomorrow.

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A few nights later Senth woke just before dawn and knew that it was time. She got up and crept into Radan's room. He had protected it, of course, but she got through that easily. It woke Radan up a little; he turned and groaned. Good. She didn't want him completely awake until the trial was underway.

The surface of his mind lay wide open. He had protected the room but not himself, or dropped that protection when Senth had broken the first layer. Sloppy. I'll have to teach him better manners. She had in fact taught him better manners. Perhaps he felt so safe in Senth's house that he didn't think it necessary.

Carefully, without rousing him any further, she probed beneath the surface and set her mark on him, the master's command. Then she withdrew and wrapped herself in the illusion of a full cloak, hooded, darkest blue. Let him think I'm Naigha.

"Radan."

He stirred, opened his eyes, sat bolt upright. His eyes dilated as they adjusted to the dark. "You?"

"It depends on who you think you're addressing," Senth said, keeping her voice too low to recognise.

"Naigha." He swallowed audibly. "I didn't think it was time yet."

"Someone has persuaded the gods for you." Senth let the illusion of Naigha's mantle melt away, replacing it with a cope of cloth-of-gold. She didn't show her face yet; it got lost in the brightness.

"Mizran?"
"Look." The cope became a cloak again, fiery red, swaying in an unfelt breeze. Flames played at the edges of the image, licking at Radan. He winced, though the flame wasn't even warm. "Are you ready?"

Radan tried to speak, but his voice caught in his throat. He nodded instead.

"Come," Senthi said and took his hand.

They were in Senthi's inner space now, walking the long corridors that it had acquired in the last few years. The floor was tiled like that of the Temple of Mizran, but in dark iridescent colours, blue and violet and deep wine-red. Senthi was amused to see that Radan's spirit-image was dressed like a wealthy merchant: in a padded green velvet doublet with creamy silk gleaming through the slits in the sleeves. It fit the setting, but she suspected that this was his usual image of himself rather than one made on purpose. She led him to what she thought of as the great hall. It was really a great courtyard, open to the stars, surrounded by a roofed walkway.

Senthi put Radan in the middle of the open space, his face to the south. He swayed, trying to find his place and failing. Senthi took pity on him and steadied him with her hand. She felt Radan's real hand gripping hard on her real wrist. *That will be a bruise when we come out of this.* She couldn't do anything about it right now.

Senthi willed a flame into existence in front of Radan. It hung in the air without apparent support or anything to feed it. "Take it," she said. "Become master of it."

He put out an uncertain hand, flinching from it because this flame really was hot. Senthi stood on the south side, still clothed in the illusion. Radan looked her in the face without recognition. *Am I that good?* Radan was expecting Archan, so it was Archan he saw: in the south, across a flame, it could hardly be anyone else. It could conceivably be the Nameless, but Senthi didn't think she could manage that. She dug in her feet and stood like a statue.

Radan closed his eyes, concentrating, and gloves came into being on his outstretched hands. They were green-dyed leather to match his
doublet. Senthi suppressed a snort. The gloves would be serviceable enough. He took the flame by its base and the leather didn't even smoulder. *All right, he has the strength to take it. Now let's see what he does with it.*

Radan raised his hands with the flame, looking up at it. It spread out, turned fluid, almost like water, except that it was still clearly fire. It ran over his hands and arms, down his body, enveloping him in bright radiance. Senthi couldn't keep her face straight this time, but Radan wasn't looking at her at all any more. He stood basking in the fire that flowed around him. It seemed to seep into him like rain into dry soil, filling him with light.

When he lowered his hands the fire went out, though he was still glowing with its power. He looked straight across at the image of Archan and recognised Senthi.

"It was you all the time." It was not a question, though Senthi knew that he hadn't been sure before.

"Yes."

"But it was the gods as well."

Senthi knew that it was true. By taking on the image of the gods, she had called them.

"Let's go." This time it was Radan who took Senthi's hand. They crossed the courtyard and walked the tiled corridor, until they were back in Radan's room where the full light of day was trying to come through the shutters. Senthi threw them wide open and noticed the print of Radan's four fingers on her wrist.

She took the ribbon out of her pocket and put it in Radan's hand. He flinched.

"Did it hurt you?"

"No. Not really. I think I expected it to hurt and it didn't." He put the ribbon away inside his shirt. "I really am a master now, aren't I?"

"You are. Nobody can take that fire inside himself and survive and not be a master."
“Do you have it?”

“A little. Not as much as you have. Most of what I have is earth. You saw the castle.”

He nodded thoughtfully. He still looked very raw, like a newly minted coin or an untempered sword.

“Take the day off,” Senthi said. “Go to the bath-house, write a letter to your mother, do whatever you like. I won’t be expecting you at the Temple today.”
"His Royal Highness Prince Alysei Athal astin Velain," the clerk announced. Before Senthi could tell her to show him in the prince entered the room, closely followed by Radan. Athal was dressed richly, as if he had come straight from court. He had filled out since Senthi had last seen him: the coltish long arms and legs now fit him perfectly.

"Your Highness," she said.

"Oh, you can use my name." He sat down on the corner of Senthi's desk. "So can your young man."

"I'm my own young man," Radan said. "Ainei Radan."

Athal scowled at him and turned to Senthi. "I have a business proposal for you."

"I thought you'd come to pay me the thirty riders you still owe me," Senthi said. "The way you look you can evidently afford it."

*Probably his tailor's money.* Radan's thought was bitter, but his face showed nothing. The boy was learning.

Athal smiled a disarming smile. *Gods, he's handsome. And he thinks he can sway me with it.*

"I understand you represent the Dawn as well as being the Mighty Servant," he said. "My sister the queen orders her medicines from you. From the Dawn, that is."

Senthi nodded. "She does indeed." *What does he want?*
"You might be interested in orders from me as well." He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. Senthi looked through it. Nothing she couldn't supply; nothing, in fact, that any apothecary in town couldn't supply.

"I've heard that the best brus in the world comes from Iss-Peran," the prince said. "I trust that you know how to get it."

"I'll see what I can do," Senthi said. "Are you staying at the castle?"

"Yes, with Corin," Athal said. "I'll be in again tomorrow." He let Radan show him out.

When Radan came back Senthi passed him the list. "I wonder why he buys that from us and not from the corner shop," she said. "Any ideas?"

"Probably wants to know whether we're as good as our word? Or doesn't want to be seen buying brus for fear that it will be all over the town?"

"I don't know. I can't make anything of Athal. Did you notice he didn't even answer me about the thirty riders?"

"What made him owe you?"

"I got him out of trouble by paying his gambling debt. Years ago."

"So you've still got a hold on him. Clever."

"He's so slippery that I don't think I'll ever get it back unless I tie him up right here and claim it from the queen herself. She's in Turenay, I suppose, or he wouldn't come here and mention her medicine."

"I'll find out for you."

Radan found out the same day. "The queen is in Turenay all right," he said. "I ran into Raneth Velain in town and she's about to go there to join her. As for his orders, he has been to the apothecary and bought some brus and vervain and some of the other herbs on his list, so it can't be that he wants to keep it secret. Could he be looking for something to blackmail you with?"

"I can blackmail him."

"What are you going to do?"
"I'll order his stuff for him and make him pay in advance. If he doesn't pay up, then I'll blackmail him."

Radan grinned. "I'll make sure that he knows that, shall I?"

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Athal did in fact pay, much to Senthi's surprise. He also paid her the thirty riders. "I wonder where he got it," she said to Radan when the prince had left with his receipts. "Probably sponged on his sister who borrowed from the Brun coffers. Or he's finally figured out a way to win at gambling."

The queen was still in Turenay, likely to spend the whole winter there. Senthi decided to go and pay a visit. She realised that she had never been to Turenay, even though it was less than two days' ride away and the Guild of Archan there was part of her territory. She would leave Veray to Radan, young as he was, with the two experienced head clerks to catch any lapses in the Temple and the landlord of the Bunch of Grapes to support him with the Guild. He'll have to learn anyway, he'd better start learning now.

It was a pity that he didn't have what it took to be a grand master, though he was very close. She would eventually have to find someone to train as her successor, but perhaps not just yet.

As soon as Senthi could get away after the Feast of Mizran, she packed some clothes and her sword and set out on a hired saddle-mare. After the bay gelding had died of old age she had never bought another horse of her own. She didn't do much riding any more: she had become important enough for people to come to her instead of her having to go to them.

It was strange to be travelling alone again. She hadn't been properly alone, not even in her own house, for years. There were always people around. Most of them were servants and underlings, very few were even close to being her equals, but they all had something to do with her, something to ask of her. The people she passed on the road didn't make her less alone. It was a very rich and free feeling. Nobody to take care of except myself.
As she neared Turenay, she stopped at the side of the road to probe the town. There were surprisingly few gifted people there, at least not many who used their gifts. The queen's entourage --that must be the large concentration of people just north of Turenay itself-- sported some. They were mostly in the Guild of the Nameless, of course. Senthi recognised Raneth Velain and a few more of Laran's former noble children. The Guild of Archan was pitifully small. She knew that many people had come to Veray, but there should still be at least three times as many as she could see now. *I'll have to do something about it now that I'm here.*

One mind caught her attention, in the part of town near the stream she thought was called the Nysa. It stood out like a flame. Completely untrained, pure and untouched. She'd have to find it. Here was a potential grand master, someone to take on as her apprentice, who hadn't even been found by the Nameless or his servants yet. How could they have been so ineffective? If Senthi could find this one without even looking hard, why hadn't the masters in Turenay or in the queen's company found it? Found *her*, she realised: it was a girl barely past puberty, not very healthy, probably ill-nourished. Well, she could take care of that when the girl was apprenticed to her.

She spurred on the horse and entered the town. Most of it was new, built within the last ten or fifteen years, probably because the queen and the court had discovered the health-giving waters. There were some older buildings, though: she passed a town-house of the House Eraday in use as a fencing school --she committed that to memory to be able to go there to practise-- and a similar house, a little larger but with a smaller yard, with the leaping wolf of the House Brun on the shield over the door. That, at least, seemed to be inhabited by the family.

There was an inn run by people of her own Guild, but it was hardly a place for a Mighty Servant to be seen. She put up at the largest and richest-looking inn instead, appropriately called the Crown. The inn was almost full already. Most people were nobles too minor to be in the queen's party or merchants tacking a visit to Turenay on to the wine fair in Veray. Some of the merchants greeted Senthi because they'd met her
there. It reminded her that she should see the local Mighty Servant as soon as she could.

The Crown had decent food, at least. Senthi suspected that it was mostly because the hunting season had started on the Feast of Mizran. She heard the nobles around her commenting on it and exchanging hunting stories that got taller with the flow of the wine. The wine was decent as well: she recognised a vintage that her own people had sold to several innkeepers in Turenay. *It's a good thing that most people here don't know who I am*, she thought. In this place she looked like just another merchant.

The next day she went to the Temple of Mizran and asked to see the Mighty Servant. He was small and elderly, hardly noticeable among the more flamboyant-looking priests, but with much presence once Senthi was in his office.

"Ah, my colleague from Veray. Are you here on business?"

"I'm the representative for the Dawn in Ryshas, and that means some business with the court, but I'm here for personal reasons in the first place. To see the queen."

"If you want to see the queen and to have an opening to the court, I can give you an invitation to the royal dance the day after tomorrow. It's at Ryath astin Hayan's place. Do you know it?"

"North, is it?"

"Yes, you go out the north gate --not that there's much of a gate there, the road becomes unpaved, that's all-- and keep going until you reach the manor. An hour or so on horseback, no more."

"It sounds good."

He gave her a piece of paper with a blank space for her name. "They probably won't ask for it if you look as if you belong there. It doesn't matter if you don't know anyone."

"I happen to know the queen's brother. And her cousin as well. I'll manage. Thank you."
Once out of the Temple, Senthi tried to find someone who would count as the head of the Guild. The only people she was at all sure of were in the south-eastern part of town, that she could see now was less than savoury.

One man looked as if he was her best bet, the best of a bad lot. She had to admit that she'd met Guild leaders in a bad neighbourhood before, but it was much worse here than in Valdis. She put on her riding clothes, the least conspicuously rich things she had with her, and went into the neighbourhood without an escort, but well-protected. She'd notice any robbers before they could even come out of the alley. She didn't wear her sword, that would stand out too much, but carefully concealed her daggers in her sleeves.

She found the man she'd seen earlier in a gambling house, presiding over the stakes. He was unshaven --probably his natural state-- and so dirty and rumpled that Senthi thought it might be the end of the previous night rather than the current morning for him. She stood in front of him and dropped most of her protection.

"Are you the head of the Guild of Archan here?"

He blanched. "Yes. Erm-- Ravei Meran."

"I'm Arnei Senthi from Veray. I've come to call a Guild meeting. Can you do that, or at least tell me who to call?"

He excused himself from the gaming table and took Senthi into a small back room. "I didn't realise there was a grand master coming. If you'd told me beforehand the Guild would have been ready for you."

"Never mind, I'm here now."

"I'll call them," Meran said. "Can I use your name?"

"Of course you can. Is there any place that's suitable to have the meeting? I don't think we could have it here."

"The old Temple of Naigha will do. It's used as a meeting hall. The part that isn't rented out by the room, that is. I'll show you where it is." An image appeared in her mind, much clearer than she'd have believed him capable of. Well, at least there's something he's good at. Would she ask him about the girl with the great fiery gift? No, it was probably better to
look into that herself and not tell Meran until everything was settled. The last thing they needed in Turenay was rivalry. As long as Meran didn't know there was anything to fight about, he probably wouldn't fight.

Senthi left Meran's place and walked in the direction of the Nysa, where she could sense the girl's mind. She found her doing some washing, kneeling almost in the stream, her lank hair dangling in her face. There was a younger girl beside her, perhaps eight years old, who shook out each piece the elder one had wrung and put it in a basket.

Senthi stood watching until the girl got up, stretching her back and long legs. She was taller than Senthi, though she couldn't be older than fourteen. Thin, no breasts to speak of, not at all pretty, but with a hint of strong handsomeness in the bones of her face.

On the path leading up the bank from the stream she waited for the girls to come her way. There was no other road they could take. Presently they arrived. "Excuse me," the tall girl said.

Senthi didn't get out of the way, but smiled at her. "Can you spare a moment?"

The girl shrugged. "Anything in it for us?"

"Perhaps." Senthi made sure, without being obtrusive about it, that the girl saw her well-filled purse. She followed them to a little house, hardly more than a shack, where the girls hung up the washing on a frayed grey line. The washing itself was frayed and grey as well. It hung there dripping dismally.

"I didn't introduce myself," Senthi said. "Sorry about that. I'm Arnei Senthi."

The girl didn't say her name. "You're a priestess of the Temple, aren't you? The ones with the golden robes." How could she have known that? Perhaps she'd recognised the seal that hung from Senthi's belt. Her dialect was hard to understand, even though Senthi had lived in Ryshas for years.

"Well, yes, I'm a priestess of Mizran, but I'm here for something different. I'm also a servant of Archan. I've noticed that you have a great gift, and I can help you learn to use it."
There was a gasp from the younger girl. Her sister gestured at her. "Go tend the fire, Raisse, I have things to talk about with this lady." The child disappeared into the house. Senthi could sense that she was still watching with great alertness.

"Don't mind my sister," the girl said. "She's that age. Always wanting to meddle."

"It's all right. It's you I want to talk to. Have you ever noticed that you are gifted?"

"Pah. I have no gifts. I can keep a household running, that's all."

"Do your parents know?"

"They're both with Naigha. It's only my little sister and me now. And she doesn't know anything."

I wouldn't be so sure of that, Senthi thought.

"What?"

"You heard that?"

"It wasn't very clear. You were mumbling."

"I was thinking, and not even addressing you. That's one of the ways your gift works. I can teach you how to do that."

"Hear what people are thinking? No, thanks. I have a hard enough time listening to what people say."

"You can influence people. You can become powerful. I'll take you as my own apprentice."

She snorted. "I can't pay the twelve riders."

"That will be taken care of. I work at the Temple of Mizran, remember? Lots of money there. I can easily borrow twelve riders for you and you can pay it back when you're done learning."

The girl stood biting her lip for a while. "Well. I'd sure like to get out of this dump. And get Raisse out as well."

"If you become my apprentice, you'll live with me in my house. And your sister too, of course." She could have little Raisse as a maid until her gifts started to show.
The girl started to nod uncertainly. The door of the house flew open and little Raisse ran out, flinging herself at her sister. "Don't do it, Riei! She's of the Nameless! She'll eat you alive!"

Riei hesitated. Senthi took Raisse by the shoulder. She yelped. "Let go of me! You're hurting me!"

"I was talking to your sister. Keep out of it."

"Yes," Riei said. "You keep out of it. I want to hear what she has to say. She doesn't look as if she wants to eat us."

Anger built up in Raisse's eyes. It reminded Senthi very much of what she herself had been like as a child, except that Raisse's anger took the form of tiny flashes of lightning that did hardly more than tingle. "You know, you're gifted too," she said, still holding the child at arm's length. "I could teach both of you."

Raisse spat in her face. Or at least, she tried to spit in her face but the spit hit the front of her jacket instead. Senthi pushed her away, hard, and the child fell backwards and didn't move.

"You've killed her!"

"Only knocked her out." She knew that it was true; she'd been practically in Raisse's mind when the girl's head hit a stone. She carried her into the house and laid her down on the makeshift bed. "She'll come round in half an hour or so. She may not remember everything, but that's normal."

"I don't know if I still want to talk to you when you treat my sister like that."

"I don't know if I still want to talk to you when your sister treats me like that. That's one fierce child. Probably because she's growing up in a place like this. When I take you as apprentices, we'll have to tame her."

"But are you of the Nameless?"

"He has a name. Archan. Some may call him evil, but my teacher used to say that there is no good or evil, only strong or weak, and ours is the side that is strong."

"I don't know. What will you teach me if I become your apprentice?"
"To use your gifts. To protect yourself and your sister against people who want to hurt you. To have power over people who are weaker than you."

"To serve the Nameless? To treat people like dirt?" Riei was slower to anger than her sister, but it was there now. "Thanks, but no thanks. I've had quite enough of that. Find someone else."

She started to turn away. Senthi held her with her gaze. The girl was surprisingly strong. "I'll make you a grand master," Senthi said. "You'll be rich and powerful. All the world will respect you."

Slowly, Riei shook her head. "I'd rather stay honourable."

"Then be honourable." Senthi tightened her grip on Riei's mind, surrounding it with power. The girl's eyes grew wider. I can kill you. Riei started to shudder. I know you can hear me. I can kill you, but I'll leave you to live with your honour. She found the core of Riei's mind and ripped it wide open. The girl crumpled, unconscious, but still alive as Senthi had promised.
Chapter 30

"So few?" Senthì asked, the next evening in the meeting hall in the old Temple of Naigha. "Seven masters and four journeymen. Is that all?" She glared at the little gathering in front of her. "Are there none of us among the nobles? The nobles' retainers and servants? The season's guests?"

"You didn't tell me to call those," Meran said.

"They're of our Guild; they're in Turenay. They should be here. Go on, call them." She crossed her arms demonstratively and waited.

Presently half a dozen more people came in. There were even two nobles, of the House Eraday, come from Lenyas to join the royal party. When everybody was seated Senthì stood up and put her hands on the table. "Still no more than seventeen people. As I said, is that all? We control Ildis and Rizenay, we're strong in Lenay and very strong in Veray, why can't we be strong here?"

"We don't have a grand master," Meran said.

"Neither does Lenay. And Ildis has only Loryn and I can't say he's very effective, except as the figurehead of the Royal Guards. It's no excuse. If you need a grand master, I'm less than two days away. Three at most on foot. The Guild of the Nameless is far too strong here. You should be recruiting gifted children before they get at them." Which I tried. And failed. Well, that's the risk of the job.

There was some murmuring among the nobles and their companions. Senthì heard just enough. "And it's no excuse either that you're only here
for the winter. As long as you're in Ryshas you're under my authority." She turned to her other side. "Meran."

"Yes, mistress?"

"The next time I'm in this town I'll expect twice as many people. Bring the apprentices, show them to me. And make sure that everyone who comes here sees you. If they don't feel safe in your usual surroundings, which I can well imagine, find a place where all of you can show yourselves."

"Yes, mistress."

They went over the accounts of Guild fees, trials, boring everyday things. Not much happened in Turenay at the best of times, and even with the queen and most of her court in residence the Guild was too small to do anything constructive. They didn't even have enough people to actively recruit apprentices. It was still early when Senthi closed the meeting.

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The day of the royal dance arrived with the sun coming out tentatively from behind the clouds that had been obscuring it for weeks. A good sign, Senthi thought.

By mid-afternoon she arrived at Ryath astin Hayan's manor house, which was already full of people. She knew surprisingly many of them: wine merchants from Veray, the elderly Mighty Servant, and some of Laran's former noble children, now grown up. Corin wasn't there --she would have known if he was-- but his wife was, heavily pregnant, on her brother's arm.

"Arin. Tylse. You might have come to the Guild meeting last night," Senthi said to them when they'd greeted her. "There were only seventeen people and six of them were from the queen's entourage."

"We were already here," Tylse said. "We didn't know there was a meeting, or we'd have come."
"Meran sent out a call." Suddenly she knew why Tylse and Arin hadn't been there. "I think you couldn't hear him. Meran doesn't reach that far. Next time I'll have to do it myself."

She spotted Athal, leaning against a panelled wall. His dark blue doublet set off his fair hair and grey eyes perfectly. He looked languid and bored, but apart from that startlingly like his sister, who was sitting near the fire.

Sentry hadn't seen Queen Alyse since she was a young princess. Now, aged about thirty, she looked much older, tired and drained, with a blotchy face. It wasn't only the added responsibility after her father's death. Her wasting sickness would eventually kill her, even with the medicines she got through the Dawn. It would perhaps be merciful if it killed her sooner rather than later, but the crown princess was no more than seven years old --there she was, a pretty golden-haired child in layers upon layers of pale blue lacy skirts-- and Athal was hardly suitable to be king. Now if they had some way to get a hold on the little princess--

"Excuse me. Are you Sentry of the Dawn?"

The man addressing her was dressed as a scholar rather than a nobleman or a merchant, but his clothes were of rich fabrics. He was lean, and not much taller than she was, though he took up a lot of space: he was a master in the Guild of the Nameless and not in the least ashamed of it. Faintly familiar; perhaps she'd seen him in the Temple in Veray.

"Yes, I am. How can I help you?"

"I'm Her Majesty's physician. Name of Jilan. I've been ordering medicines from you."

"My assistant handles that, Radan, he's in Veray at the moment," Sentry said. "If you want to place more orders, you can write him a letter and give it to me."

"No, it's not that-- it's rather a delicate matter. I've asked Lady Ryath for a private room to speak to you." Now Sentry saw a page hovering at the doctor's elbow, ready to take them to that private room.
It seemed, Senthi grasped from what Jilan told her in flowery medical language, that the queen hadn't been reacting to her medicine as she ought to. In fact she might as well not have been taking any at all for the last few moons, because nothing she took helped her. Did Senthi by any chance know whether the Dawn had changed suppliers recently?

"Radan knows that. If you come with me when I go back to Veray in a few days, you and he can look through the books. Most of the things we sell to the court come from our regular suppliers in Albetire. The safe and slow route, of course, we don't trust the fast ships with important orders."

"That would be a good idea." The doctor put his ear to the door. "I think they're starting to serve now."
Chapter 31

Jilan was a pleasant travelling companion, knowledgeable about many kinds of things. It turned out that he was not only a doctor, but had been a traveller in wines as well. Senthi was beginning to suspect that he was first and foremost a Guild runner, possibly a spy, but she didn't want to damage their tentative understanding by asking about that.

Radan was still in one piece, but very glad that Senthi was back. "I'm not cut out for Mighty Servant," he said. "Far too many people hassling me."

"I've brought the queen's own physician to hassle you," Senthi said.

Radan and Jilan spent some hours going over the books, tracking down suppliers, asking clerks to bring herbals. "I can't find anything untoward in this," Jilan said. "She's been having trouble for half a year and nothing has changed in the records of your deliveries."

Radan bit his stylus. "Not on this end. How about the other end? We're not there to check on the suppliers. We're not even in Essle where it comes in, let alone in Albetire where it's packed."

Jilan nodded. "You have a point. I'll see if I can send someone to Albetire to investigate."

"I could send Radan," Senthi said. "Radan, what do you think?"

"Well, I would like to go to Albetire. But if I'm shipwrecked you're short an assistant."
"I can send someone else. It would have to be someone I don't trust as much as I do you, but that can't be helped."

"No, I'll go," Radan said, with a determined look on his face.

"You really do want to go, don't you?" Jilan asked. "Not just because you think it's your duty."

"I've always wanted to," Radan said. Senthi knew it to be true; not only had Imri said so in Essle, Radan himself had told her that it had been his childhood ambition.

"I've been there. I can't leave my queen now, or I'd go myself. It's perhaps not as easy as you think. Come, I'll buy you dinner and we'll talk about it."

Jilan took Radan out, leaving Senthi with the books. So she was short an assistant, perhaps permanently. On the other hand, Radan was a grown man now and he needed the experience. He would be all the more useful when he came back. If he came back. Senthi fully intended to put him in charge of the Veray office of the Dawn and go back to Essle herself to take over the main branch. Or even move the main branch to Veray, though that would be a hassle, and give Essle to Radan. After all these years in Ryshas the idea of living in Essle again didn't appeal to her.

At least she didn't have to worry that Jilan would persuade Radan to go over to the Guild of the Nameless. Radan was too strong for that. It was a pity that it was as unlikely to happen the other way around.

The next day Radan came in late, Jilan on his heels. Both of them looked haggard, as if they hadn't been to bed all night, but their eyes were bright like those of little boys expecting an adventure. They were carrying maps which they spread out on Senthi's desk.

"I would go with you if Her Majesty could spare me," Jilan said. "It's not really a journey to make alone, but I told you that already."

"I'll give you a letter for Tarin," Senthi said. "It's likely that you can join one of his trading delegations."

"What can I do?" Radan asked. "I mean, how much authority do I have?"
Senthi had already thought about that. "I don't think it's wise to do anything at all except investigate at this time," she said. "We don't want to alert them. Find out what's happening, be sure to know names, come back and report. You can tell them that you're from the Dawn and want to know about supply lines first-hand. You might even be able to open new lines of business. Spices, medicines, pigments, those are things you know about. You're authorized to do that."

Radan nodded. "So I can do anything that seems reasonable as long as I keep silent about the real reason for being there?"

"Exactly," Senthi said.

"We ought to be enemies," Jilan said, "but as we're working together, I wish the blessing of your god on you."

"Thank you," Radan said with a grin. Senthi looked away. Why do I have to have such honourable enemies?

Jilan went back to his queen. Radan travelled south. Senthi started to train another assistant, Serla, who had a head for finance and a way with people. She might make Mighty Servant yet; her temperament was much better suited to it than Radan's.

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Three seasons and part of a fourth passed without any news from the south. Senthi was a little annoyed-- why couldn't Radan at least have sent a letter from Essle? He was probably on a ship between Essle and Albetire now, or already in Albetire.

When Athal's herbs arrived, Senthi locked everything in a chest and sent a message to Valdis asking what to do with it. Athal wrote her a terse note asking to send a messenger. She contemplated going herself, but Serla wasn't up to taking over yet.

She called in the apothecary to confirm that the shipment matched the list. Not for the first time she wished that Radan was there. He had been gone for almost a year --was it really that long?-- and she was still not completely used to his absence.
News came from Valdis that the queen was worse and would not be able to entertain in Turenay that autumn. Whether or not she would be in Turenay at all was carefully evaded.

It was a quiet winter, damp and chilly, subdued like Senthi's mood. Spring brought too much rain that drowned the vines and sudden late frosts that damaged the delicate new buds. On top of that, summer was late in coming and not very convincing when it did come. It was the worst year Senthi had seen in Veray yet, almost as bad as the year she had spent in Ildis, though she knew that in Ildis it was the normal climate. Ryshas ought to be better.

Midsummer, too, was subdued, with half the people worried about their crops or vintage or trade. When Senthi surveyed the minds under her mastery, she saw many clouded and preoccupied. One stood out, coloured with anticipation rather than worry, strangely familiar--

_Radan?_

_The same._ He came out of the shadows. If Senthi hadn't seen his mind first she probably wouldn't have recognised him right away. He was sleek and tanned, slightly weathered, with a little beard that made him look much older than his twenty-three years. He seemed taller, too, but when he came to stand next to Senthi she saw that it was only that he stood straighter.

"Did you succeed?"

"Yes. I'll tell you about it in the morning. Right now I only want to celebrate." Someone came to stand beside him, a willowy young woman with hair almost as straight as Senthi's own, but skin as brown as Ruzyn's. It gave Senthi a pang of remembrance. "My wife, Varyn. I met her in Essle before we sailed."

"And after half a year cooped up in a ship together we were still in love," Varyn said. "You must be Senthi. Radan said it was impossible to overlook you, and he was right." Her speech was charmingly southern, reminding Senthi of Aine. Radan had also picked up the southern speech again.
"It's good to have you back," Senthí said. "Gods, I didn't know how much I would miss you."
"This," Radan said, "is common wormwood." He unwrapped the packet in front of him on the table, oiled cloth, then paper, to reveal some dry sprigs that spread a bitter smell when the unpacking crushed them.

"Well, yes, I know that," Senthi said.

"Wait. This is sweet wormwood." Another parcel, similar sprigs, perhaps a little greener and with slightly more pointed leaves. "I don't know why it's called sweet, because it's every bit as bitter as the other stuff, but this is what the queen needs for her illness. It doesn't cure, not completely, but it prolongs life and gives relief."

"You've been talking to your mother."

"Of course I've been talking to my mother. The point is that it's very easy to mistake one for the other."

"Mistake?"

"Substitute, in fact. Someone paid the packers to pack common wormwood instead."

"Do you know who paid them?"

"Athal. Well, his agents. I have all the names, but it goes back to the prince in the end."

"Where does he get the money?"
"I haven't been able to determine that," Radan said. "The lot that went out when we were there is the right stuff, by the way. Varyn switched the labels while I was talking to the packers."

"I see why you married her," Senthi said.

Radan grinned. "What do we do now?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Do you mean we let the queen die?"

"Yes. She's going to die anyway, sooner or later. It may even be more merciful to let her die sooner than to let her suffer interminably. What we do now is get power over the crown princess while she is still young, and make sure that Athal knows that we know what he's up to. I shall write to him and ask him to do something in compensation-- set someone up at court to scout and recruit, I think."

Radan looked as if he was about to catch fire. "You can't do that! You don't mean it!"

"What would you do, then?"

He was at a loss for words. "Well. I don't know. Warn the queen, catch Athal, pay them more to pack the right thing. Any of those things. All of them."

"Queen Alyse is going to die whatever happens. Warning her won't keep her alive any longer, not the way she is now. Getting her the right medicine won't help us, and at this stage it won't help her either. If we catch Athal he ceases to be profitable."

Radan looked even more aghast. "You can't just let this go on. Not now you know about it." He started to say more, but turned on his heel to leave the room instead.

Senth called him back when he was in the doorway. "Radan."

He paused, looking at her over his shoulder.

"If I hear that you take any action I don't approve, for instance any of the things that you've just suggested, I'll destroy you."

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255
They settled down to work again. Radan didn't talk about warning the queen any more and Senthi didn't repeat her threat of destruction, but she was wary and knew that Radan also was.

Varyn had work of her own to do: her parents were wine merchants and they had given her full authority. She came in every now and again to do Temple business, and at those times it didn't show that she and Radan were married, but when Senthi saw them around the house or in town it showed very much. It was touching and annoying at the same time. She never said anything to Radan about it.

A few weeks after the Feast of Mizran, Radan came to talk to Senthi after work. "Do you still intend to move the main office of the Dawn to Veray?"

She didn't remember telling him about that, though she remembered considering it. "Probably."

"If you do, I could run the office in Essle for you. We'd both like to go back. Varyn is expecting."

"Yes, I've noticed."

"You might have said something."

"I don't want you to think I'm prying."

He snorted. "You're not prying. Anybody halfway gifted can see it. You're being far too careful of us."

"Well, when do you want to go to Essle, now or after the child is born?"

"As soon as we can. Varyn can still travel now. I saw Imri in Essle, and I think she'll want to retire soon, especially if she knows there's someone to take over."

*Great Mizran, he's got it all set up already.* "I'll write her a letter." It would be an elegant way to get Radan out of her hair, as long as he didn't think himself too safe in Essle. She'd write Venla a letter as well and send it by another messenger. Radan could carry Imri's.
One evening, as Radan was packing his painting things, Senthi came into his room. She'd sent Varyn on an errand to make sure she wasn't in. She closed the door behind her and sealed it.

"What are you doing?" Radan asked.

"I have some... conditions... to lay on you before I can let you go to Essle," she said. "I promised to destroy you if you did anything to prevent Athal's plot against the queen. I intend to make sure of that."

"What do you mean?" He was starting to look apprehensive.

"Open your mind to me."

"Not until I know what you're going to do."

"I'm going to set a compulsion on you. If you even try to talk about Athal's plot, or to do anything else that might prevent it or alert other people to it, it will keep you from doing so."

"How?"

"Open your mind to me and you will see. I'm your master. I have that power over you, even though you're a master in your own right now. It's like the master's command, only not tied to me once it's in place."

"Tell me how you will do it." His hand went to his chest, where Senthi knew he kept his master's ribbon.

"Shall I enter by force?" She put a hand on his neck, the other on his forehead. He gasped and tensed, but she held him securely.

He opened a small passage. She entered.

Radan had a beautifully ordered mind, as neat as his pigments cabinet. His image of it was much like a cabinet as well, full of clearly labelled drawers and pigeonholes. It was easy to find the spot where he kept the memory of the prince's plot. Senthi applied pressure to it. Radan's hands clenched and his breathing became laboured.

"This is what it feels like. Try too hard and you will be destroyed." She set the compulsion in place, with the image of a boulder perched precariously above the part of Radan's mind that it guarded. "It will not fall and make a quick end, but crush you slowly. Like this." She pressed
harder. Radan's body convulsed and a dark spot appeared on the front of his hose. Senthi released him.

"Go and clean up. I'd say you've been warned enough. Come and see me when you're presentable."

He appeared in her workroom surprisingly soon, looking more cowed than she'd ever seen him. "Mistress."

"Use my name, I'm not Venla. Do you understand what happened?"

"You put a compulsion on me that will kill me if I talk about--" He swallowed. "About the--"

"See? It works. It applies to writing, too, by the way. And to speaking to someone's mind. Anyone you let into your mind will see nothing, not of the compulsion and not of what it covers. Oh, and I don't think it will kill you, but it won't leave you whole." An image of the girl in Turenay came to Senthi's mind unbidden. Shall I show him that? No, he's already been warned enough.

"Is it-- is it permanent?"

"Only a grand master can lift it. I've written to Venla. If the compulsion is no longer necessary you can go to her to have it lifted."

"How do I know?"

"Venla will know. Or I will tell you."

He nodded, took a deep breath and left the room. Senthi didn't have to tell him not to talk about the compulsion itself: that would become apparent the first time he tried.

Radan and Varyn left before the first frost, and the frost was early that winter. The harvest had been bad enough that year and it didn't look as if the next one would be better. "Radan is well out of it," Serla said when she went over the books with Senthi. "I don't blame him for wanting to be in Essle."

"It's not much better in Essle, most likely," Senthi said. "Frost in Ryshas, storms at sea. I learned that in trade school."
"Tell me again," Senthi said. "Slowly. As much of it as you can remember. I'll probably ask you to show me parts as well. I caught only half of what you said the first time."

The messenger sat on the edge of his chair in the front room of Senthi's house, looking even less comfortable than he had in the Temple. A maid brought him a cup of wine. He sniffed at it and put it on the table.

"The prince killed the lord sheriff. Lord Ayran astin Brun. Shot an arrow at him when he came back from Veray. Then they caught him, caught the prince I mean, and took him to my lady's house. I cleared out the storeroom to put him in with these two hands. My lady doesn't have any dungeons."

"No, I know that, I've been to Lady Ryath's house myself. So you cleared out the storeroom and they put the prince in. Are you quite sure it was the prince?"

"Someone called him Your Highness. And all the noble people were calling him Athal."

"Show me." Senthi took the man's hand and sensed his fear when he showed her what he had seen. Yes, that was Athal. Years older, angry, scared to death, but recognisable. She nodded.

"Did they lock him in?"
"Yes, and put a guard at the door. Not me, I'm not a soldier. They were talking about what to do with him. He wanted a fight, and the boy thought it was a good idea."

"Wait. Who wanted a fight, and what boy?"

"Young Lord Jeran, my lady's son, he's eleven or so. The prince wanted to fight for his honour and get killed."

_How like Athal. Go out in a blaze of glory._ Senthi snorted. "What did the adults think? The noble people?"

"I didn't hear all of it, but it came down to they wanted him executed. And the old lady gave him a dagger to do it himself."

"Lady Ryath?"

"Not my lady, she's not an old lady. One of Her Majesty's ladies, the one who handles the money. The old crippled lady from Valdis. I think she's called Lady Aylin."

Senthi had heard of that old lady. Aylin astin Brun, bent over with rheumatism, hardly able to walk, but with wits every bit as sharp as Senthi's own, if not more so. She handled all the Brun finances and was treasurer of the court as well. "Very honourable."

"Yes, but he didn't do it. He didn't have the courage. And he sat there all night being scared until Her Majesty came and did it."

"What did Her Majesty do?"

"Killed him, of course. With the dagger."

"Then I understood you the first time. The queen killed her brother."

"With her own right hand, mistress, true as I sit here. I had to carry the body out for the priestesses and nobody cuts their own throat clean through like that and spirits the dagger away. They told us not to talk about it, that they'd say it was a hunting accident, but I went and spoke to Master Meran and he said to go to Veray and tell you."

"Master Meran was right about that. You have done well, too. I'll see that you are rewarded. Go with my maid, now, she'll find you something to eat and a place to sleep."
So Athal was dead. Senthi didn't believe for one moment that the queen had executed him only for killing Ayran Brun, for all that Ayran was the head of the Brun family in Turenay and, as far as Senthi knew, the head of the Guild of the Nameless there as well. There must be more to it.

She took the cup of wine that the messenger hadn't drunk and sipped from it. Someone must have found out about the wormwood scam. Perhaps he'd confessed to it. The image had shown him very scared and she had no reason to doubt that.

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"I shall have to go to Valdis," Senthi told Serla a few days later. "Perhaps to Essle as well. I trust you to handle affairs as I would have handled them."

She didn't tell Serla that this was also a test: the Mighty Servant of Turenay was getting on in years and the Temple had asked Senthi to recommend someone to succeed him. She did really want to go to Valdis, to try and see the books of the court while the old lady was still in a warm bath in Turenay, but she could have sent someone else-- though she didn't have people like Radan any more to send, people she trusted implicitly until they knew too much to be trusted with.
"Lady Aylin is in Turenay? I was expecting her to be here. It's too bad. Now I've travelled all the way for nothing. Unless I could at least look at the books?"

Senthí had practised her southern accent and watched court clerks for days, until she'd found one who was likely to let her in. This one was friendly, gullible and, as it turned out, garrulous.

"Well, if you have the right authority-- ah, a letter from the Temple of Mizran, that will do. No, Lady Aylin is in Turenay with Her Majesty, they're staying on for a bit. Her Majesty hasn't been well at all lately, did you know?"

"I heard a thing or two while I was travelling. Is it very bad?"

"About as bad as it's ever been. She won't last the year, that's my opinion. The thing with the prince didn't help either."

Senthí raised an eyebrow. "What about the prince?"

"Didn't you hear that Prince Athal was killed in Turenay? They say it was an accident, but I've also heard he's been murdered and other people say it was a duel."

"And what do you think?" She kept her voice light, conversational. It wouldn't do to make it sound too much like an interrogation.

"Me, I go for the duelling. He was always one to pick a fight. You've travelled a lot, haven't you? Have you ever met him?"
"I saw him a couple of times when I was a clerk in Veray. Yes, definitely the brawling type. Kind of a coward, though, at least in those days. He was only a boy then, of course. Old King Athal was still alive."

"Well, between you and me, good riddance, I'd say. Imagine him as regent."

"Isn't the crown princess grown up by now?"

"Yes, sort of, but she's still abroad, isn't she? Though they say Her Majesty has called her back. Now, what was it you wanted to see?"

"Transactions of the court with the Dawn. We may have mixed something up in our own books, and we'd like to have the correct figures."

"Lady Aylin's figures are always correct. Come, I'll show you to the archive."

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Senthi spent the better part of the day going over the books, oblivious of anything else. If Aylin's figures were correct, then so were Radan's: they tallied perfectly. She didn't find a single discrepancy. She did find the wormwood shipments, not in Athal's name, of course, but in the name of the court doctors; she assumed that it had all been substitute except for the one time when Radan's wife had swapped the labels. The queen had indeed been in remission for a while after that, and got worse again with the next lot. There was no record of payment except the price of the goods and shipping; Athal's agents would have been careful to keep that out of the books. And as common wormwood was cheaper than sweet wormwood, any bribes could merely have come out of the difference in price. There was no way to find that out now, short of going to Albetire herself.

Also, the prince had run up enormous debts. Doing the sums in her head she came to more than twenty thousand riders. Aylin had made notes in the margins, referring to letters. Senthi would have paid dearly to get at some of those letters, but she knew that was next to impossible unless she could get hold of Aylin and find a way to make her cooperate.
She heard voices at the door and realised that the voices had been talking for quite some time.

"You seem to have let a grand master of the Nameless in," one voice said, a familiar one, though Senthi couldn't place it right away.

The clerk's voice, "I couldn't have known that, Master Jilan, she's a clerk from the Dawn wanting to look at the books. She has all the right papers."

Jilan. "Not merely a clerk, you'll find. But you're right, you couldn't have known. Vaurin here spotted her."

"Vurian." A very young voice. "And I didn't know she was a grand master, I only asked if it was all right for someone in the Guild of the Nameless to be in the palace." His accent put his birthplace far west of Ildis. Senthi remembered something she'd overheard in town, no rain at all in the Plains, they send us their children to be apprenticed so those at least have enough to eat.

"Vurian, yes, sorry. I'll talk to her." The sound of his feet came nearer. It was no use hiding herself now. She'd been so immersed in the books that she'd clean forgotten to do more than the most cursory protection.

Jilan looked travel-worn, as if he hadn't had time to wash and change after a long journey. So did the boy at his side, a scrawny child in his early teens, clearly gifted but still untrained.

"Senthi. What brings you here?"

"Checking transactions between the court and the Dawn. I expected discrepancies, but I couldn't find any."

"And does that please you or disappoint you?" I want to talk to you.

"It tells me that the discrepancies must be elsewhere." Later. I'm working.

"How much longer do you expect to be?" So am I.

"Not very long, unless Lady Aylin is here and can help me." You need a bath.

"She is indeed here, but she's not in any condition to help you at this moment." You're right. His mental grin was infectious.
"In that case I'm as good as finished. I don't need these books any more, but I would like to see Lady Aylin as soon as she's recovered." And so does that cub of yours. "I'm staying at the Three Kings."

"I'll send a message when she can receive you." And I'll call to arrange to see you in private.

"Thank you." She closed the books and carried them to the clerk at the desk. "Thank you very much. You've been extremely helpful."

Jilan started to escort her out of the palace. On the way, he paused to speak to someone in the doorway of a room that held several people. Senthi saw an elderly woman who could only be Lady Aylin, bent almost double, but standing on her own feet next to a seat that a very pregnant young woman was sitting on. I know that girl, Senthi thought. The girl looked wild-eyed, completely out of place. She was wearing a blue velvet dress much too large for her, even with the bulge of her belly. On her other side a slightly older woman knelt, talking to her in a low voice. I know that voice. Turenay, the year that she'd last seen Athal alive. These couldn't be the same two girls-- but they were, the elder one with the ravaged mind, the younger one's fierceness caged but not tamed.

Jilan must have taken them along. Or Aylin, or the queen herself. She'd find a way to ask him unobtrusively at their private meeting.

"Sorry," Jilan said, "I'm needed here. Vurian will show you out."

"I can find my own way out," Senthi said.

"I'd rather he went with you anyway." The boy attached himself to her; there was nothing for it.

"You're from the Plains, aren't you?" she asked him.

He nodded eagerly. "Tal-Crun. My parents didn't have anything to feed me so they sent me here with twelve silver riders in my pocket to find something to learn. I didn't arrive until just now, I was at the door and Master Jilan needed someone to help him."

"Are you going to be his apprentice?"

"I don't know. I've got a letter from my mother to give to Her Majesty, but I've heard that she's ill."
"Yes, she is."

"Do you think she'll die?"

"Everybody will die. But yes, she'll probably die quite soon."

They were in an unfamiliar part of the palace now. Vurian stopped and looked around. "You said you could find your own way out. Can you still do that?"

"I think so," Senthi said. She'd seen a passage not much earlier that looked as if it led to a back door.

"Then you can show me the way. I'm supposed to stay with you because you're a grand master in the Guild of the Nameless and you're not allowed in the palace alone, but, frankly, I'm lost."

"Isn't Master Jilan afraid that you won't be safe with me?"

Vurian snorted. "In the palace? You wouldn't be able to do something and escape with your life."

He was probably right, too, naïve as it was. Senthi sensed that the palace was very old, with protection built into the walls as people didn't know how to do any more, and the Guild of the Nameless had it completely in hand.

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As Senthi left the palace someone overtook her in the street. It was a woman of indeterminate age but probably some years younger than Senthi herself, richly dressed, shrouded in strong protection. In the Guild of Archan, she realised.

"Excuse me, are you Arnei Senthi from Veray?"

"Yes."

"We've never met in person, but you're responsible for my position in the palace. Can I talk to you?"

"Of course. I have a room at the Three Kings."

The woman looked disconcerted. "No, I'd rather talk at my house, if you don't mind."
Senthi followed her to a house close to the palace, small between the nobles' large townhouses, but just as opulent. When they were seated in the front room and a servant had brought them wine and food, the woman dropped her protection.

"I'm Ayneth astin Eraday. You --or rather Prince Athal at your request-- had me appointed to the court some years ago."

It suddenly dawned on Senthi who exactly this was. She nodded. "To scout and recruit. Any success?"

There was an anxious look on Ayneth’s face. "Not much. The Nameless is too strong at court. I've had to be very circumspect."

"I can imagine. Do you need help, or advice, or is there anything else I can do for you?"

The other woman was silent for a long time, looking at Senthi. Eventually she seemed to have decided that she could trust her. "You see, I'm in trouble."

"Money trouble?" She'd seen enough of that in the books to have it foremost in her mind.

"No, not that, not really. I'm independently wealthy." The house showed it, too. This was no love-nest of a prince's doxy, but solid evidence of old money. "Her Majesty has asked me to leave."

"Why?"

"She says my services aren't needed any more now the Prince is... deceased." Her eyes blazed. "After I've been his keeper for the gods know how long. If I hadn't backed him with my money it would have been much worse. No, she was going on as if I was fucking him."

"Well, were you?"

Ayneth became even redder than the anger had already made her. "Well..."

"Well?"

"At times. He had other lovers. He preferred girls from the street, in fact, the more ignorant and smelly the better."
Senthi got a fleeting image from Ayneth's mind that made her inhale sharply. *Riei*.

"Yes, disgusting, isn't it? I'd think if you can have any woman you want you'd go for the clean and cultured ones."

*Like you,* Senthi thought. Ayneth's perfume reminded her of something, but what it was eluded her. "And what exactly do you want of me? You wouldn't have stopped me in the street only for a chat and a cup of wine."

"I was wondering whether we could work out something that's advantageous for both of us. I don't know what you want, but you didn't come to Valdis only for a chat and a cup of wine either."

"That's true." Senthi emptied her cup and poured herself another. "I wanted to compare what we know of the late prince's finances to the court records."

Ayneth started.

"It's no secret," Senthi said. "Even the clerks know it. I have a letter from the Temple of Mizran stating my business. And everything tallied perfectly, in fact."

"So you know he..."

"...ran up enormous debts, yes. Any money of yours that he appropriated and that you'd like to claim from his heirs? I'm afraid that his estate runs deep into the red."

"I backed him at first," Ayneth said. "He was so convincing."

He would have been, to get into her good books. "Yes, he tended to have that effect on people. Did you lose much, before you found out what he was really like?"

"*After* I found that out, too." She was getting angry again. "My position depended on him. I couldn't have done anything for the Guild in the palace otherwise. Not that I could do much anyway, with the place reeking of the Nameless, but at least I was somewhere I could bend this and that."
"And I take it that you want to stay. Do you think I have any more influence than you, now that we can't use Prince Athal for leverage?"

"I don't have the queen's ear any more. You're going to ask for an audience, aren't you? You could perhaps plead my cause."

"In exchange for what?" Senthi certainly wasn't going to be this woman's servant.

"Money. Offer Her Majesty ten thousand to meet the Prince's debts halfway. Or come up with the other ten thousand yourself, you can probably get that from the Temple funds."

"You know everything, don't you? Have you been in the archives yourself?"

"I don't need to," Ayneth said. "I listen. People talk. Athal talked whenever he was here, oh yes, bragging all the time."

That sounded like Athal all right. "Well," Senthi said, "It's Lady Aylin I want to see, I don't even know whether the queen will give me an audience, and I ought to go to the Temple first to see how much I can raise and think it over. Can we meet again in a few days?"

"You know where I live," Ayneth said. "Send a servant."

At the door, another whiff of Ayneth's scent reached Senthi's nose and she suddenly knew where she'd smelt it before. "I'd find another perfumer if I were you, darling," she said, smiling sweetly. "The last person I knew who wore that scent was the late Mighty Servant in Essle. Not someone you'd want to share anything with."
Chapter 35

One wall of the main room of the Three Kings was completely covered with a mural of the kings the inn had been named after: Vegelin the First, Vegelin the Great and the late King Athal. They looked much alike, all slight men with red hair: the first Vegelin with a large bushy beard, dressed in drab homespun with a bearskin cloak --as if they weren't civilised in those days, Senthi thought--, Vegelin the Great very elegant in green doublet and hose, and Athal in his old age, his hair faded and streaked with white, in long dark blue robes, looking worried. That one must have been done from life.

Across the room an artist was putting the final touches to the last panel of the frieze running along the wall. It showed all the kings and queens from Vegelin the First to the current Queen Alyse. Either she hasn't seen the queen for a while or she's flattering her, Senthi thought, because the queen in the picture glowed with health and energy.

Jilan, who had come to sit beside Senthi, had the same thought. "I wouldn't want to paint the queen as she is now, either," he said. "And oh, how much our Athal would have liked to be next in line."

"Or behind us on the wall and have it called the Four Kings," Senthi said. "I've ordered a jug of wine. I'm afraid it's not the quality I serve my guests in Veray. I don't know what you're used to."

"You might be surprised. I used to travel in wines, remember? That's how I first got to Albetire."
"Ah. I was wondering."

"I've even dined with what passes for a king there. They have strange customs. They touch food only with their left hand and money with the right so the food doesn't contaminate the money. Or the money the food, that's never been clear to me. I didn't understand much of the language back then."

"Is it true that their king has a hundred wives?"

"Two hundred, last I heard. They have a huge palace for only the wives and their servants."

"How does he ever manage to satisfy them?"

"I suppose they have ways to satisfy themselves."

They laughed. They drank the wine. It was passable, certainly not what Senthi was used to, but it did recognisably come from Veray.

"This wine doesn't travel all too well," Jilan said. "I could give them a few hints, but I don't think I will."

"It would undermine your authority as court physician, I think. How is Her Majesty?"

"Not much worse. Not any better, either. That's one thing I wanted to talk to you about-- did your assistant ever find out about the medicine?"

"Didn't he send you a message? I thought he was going to."

"I never got any message. He may have sent it, but in that case it didn't arrive."

"Well, he watched the packing of one lot and made sure the right stuff was sent. If Her Majesty got the wrong stuff something must have gone amiss on the way. He could hardly stay with the shipment all the way."

"No, I understand. Anything can go wrong in transit, of course, or it may just have been in the sun too long."

They had more wine, Jilan's choice this time, and shared a roast duck. "What happened to that boy from the Plains?" Senthi asked as she wiped the last grease off her fingers. "He's a nice child."
"Vurian, yes. I only had him for a few days. Now that I've got his name right he's not at court any more. I sent him to Turenay just the other day, to the new Guild school."

"Your Guild, I take it."

"Of course. You know Athal killed the head of the Brun family there?"

"Yes, I heard that. With an arrow."

"Two arrows, in fact, as well as one that missed him and killed someone else. It can't have been an accident. His daughter set up a school for gifted children in his memory. It was what he had always wanted. They needed students to get started and I happened to have one on hand."

"From a poor Plains family? I hope all their students aren't like that."

"They're not that poor. He's Vurian astin Brun: his mother married a farmer in the west. Only they haven't had any rain at all for almost two years and now the wells are running dry as well. I think it's a good move to send their extra children to better places."

"Will you be sending that pregnant girl to Turenay as well?"

"What? Oh, the one you saw when I had to leave you to Vurian. No, she's from Turenay, a charity case of Aylin's. The prince killed her child's father too, that was the arrow that went astray. We'll have to fatten her up a lot before she's going anywhere. Her Majesty has taken a fancy to her, she'll probably take her on as a laundry maid or something. Her sister as well. She's simple-minded, poor thing."

"The pregnant one?"

"No, the sister. It looks like something damaged her mind when she was young. Could have been a fall on the head, or sickness, or even someone who wanted something from her and pushed too hard."

Senthi made an effort not to show her alarm. "Can't you do anything about it?"

"I don't think I can even determine what happened to her. It needs a grand master to do that. The midwife and I both looked at her and couldn't see the scars, though we know they have to be there."
Senthi relaxed a little. Thank Archan, they hadn't found her out and weren't likely to. She had no desire to fight, or to stand trial with the Order of the Sworn. But she knew she had to leave Valdis soon. If the matter came to light, Jilan might even kill her himself.

Jilan misunderstood her sigh, fortunately. "Yes, it's a sad affair."

Senthi nodded. "Do you know yet when I could speak with Lady Aylin?" she said. "And I'd like an audience with Her Majesty too, if she's well enough."

"I'll inquire. In a few days, probably. When did you intend to go back?"

"I think I can stay another few days."

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Jilan was as good as his word. Three days later he sent a messenger to take Senthi back to the palace if she was free. She was; she'd been waiting and preparing.

The messenger took her to what he called "the small throne room", fully as large as the great hall of the castle in Veray. The queen was sitting, not on the ornate wooden throne on the dais at one end, but in an easy chair near the fire halfway down the side. Aylin was beside her in another easy chair. Senthi swallowed a curse. She'd forgotten to make it clear to Jilan that she preferred to see the two separately. Well, it wasn't to be helped now, she could hardly ask either of them to leave.

"Your Majesty," she said. "Lady Aylin. I'm glad that you were able to receive me."

The queen acknowledged her with a nod. She looked exhausted and pitifully thin, pale except where her skin was covered in a red rash that made a symmetrical pattern like a mask on her face, years if not decades older than her age. Senthi probed carefully with her mind. Though she was far from being a doctor even she could see that the clerk had been right, it was unlikely that Alyse would last the year.

Aylin was in as sorry a state. Her hands were claws, her back bent double, her neck strangely crooked. They looked like a pair of hags, like a
nightmare. Senthi wanted to shake herself to lose the image, but kept it to a mental shake. Neither of them was gifted, thank Archan. She looked around as cautiously as she had looked at the queen--yes, there was a watcher in a curtained niche, strongly camouflaged, as Ruzyn had watched in Venla's house. There was also an archer on the gallery on the other side of the room, but he was leaning against the banister eating an apple. So they didn't expect her to attack the queen or Lady Aylin, but they did take precautions. Wise of them; they couldn't know it was unnecessary.

"My condolences on the death of your brother," Senthi said.

The queen spoke in a harsh voice. "Thank you. May I suppose that offering your condolences is not your only reason to come?"

Gods, the woman was perspicacious. "You may."

Aylin whispered something to Alyse that Senthi couldn't quite catch, but it might have contained "the books".

"I represent the Dawn. We found some discrepancies in our books and your clerks have graciously permitted me to look at Lady Aylin's ledgers so we could correct our figures. I'd hoped that you would already be there," --with a slight incline of the head to Aylin-- "but your archive clerk was so good as to show me what I needed. While I was at it I noticed that the late Prince Athal has been running up serious debts."

"I cannot deny that that is true," Aylin said. Senthi couldn't read her face, but the queen's red mask grew a little darker.

"My offer is for the Dawn to cover at least part of it, as some of the money went into irregular transactions with us that we could perhaps have prevented if we'd been observant enough. Would ten thousand be adequate as compensation?"

Silence fell. Senthi heard a rustle behind the curtain. After a while the two women spoke at the same time.

The queen said, "You have been speaking to that Eraday woman."

Aylin said, "The House Velain will not be bribed."
But perhaps the House Brun would? "It is not my intention to bribe," Senthi said. "Only to compensate."

"Out." The queen's voice was a croak. "Out of my house. Out of my city."

"I advise you to leave immediately," Aylin added.

Even without that, Senthi would have left. She did not give in to her anger until she was out of the palace.
Chapter 36

Senthí threw the last few things into her pack and sat down on the bed. There was nothing more she could do. Leave immediately, Aylin had said, but the old woman couldn't very well expect her to leave town at sunset, could she?

"I've packed my bags, I've paid my bill, the gates are closed," she said aloud.

And the walls have ears, Jilan's thought came from somewhere close. He stood in the doorway, smiling.

"Have you come to gloat at me?" Senthí asked.

"I've come to say goodbye. That my queen has taken a dislike to you doesn't mean that I have to."

Senthí shrugged. "I only wanted to establish friendly relations with the court," she said.

"Her Majesty seems to have understood it as an attempt to bribe her," Jilan said. "She isn't inclined to take bribes."

"She knows that Athal ruined the family. Any attempt to improve that should be welcome."

"Perhaps you shouldn't have been so obvious."

"Wait a moment. You were behind the curtain, weren't you?"

"Raisse and I. Did you see only one of us?"
The sinking feeling came back. "I only saw that there was someone. No more than I'd expected. I didn't want to probe further, it would only have caused trouble."

Jilan sat down beside her. "Raisse recognised you. She'd forgotten what happened but it came back when she heard your voice."

Senthi looked down at her feet. She felt the blood rise in the veins on her neck. She swallowed hard. "And now? Are you going to kill me for that? Or report me to the Order of the Sworn?"

"I thought of reporting you to the Order of the Sworn, but it's bad form to do that here and now for a transgression in Turenay seven years ago. And if I were going to kill you, I'd have done that already. No, you won't have it so easy. I expect that Raisse will want to settle with you herself when the time comes."

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Veray looked extraordinarily bleak and hostile when Senthi came through the west gate. There was something in the air that she didn't like at all. She dumped her bags in the hallway of her house and went on to the Temple at once. If there was any trouble, it was probably there; it didn't feel like a Guild thing.

That reminded her to tell Corin that she was home. *Come to dinner tonight*, he said. *You'll want to talk.*

Now what was that about? Well, she'd find out. First things first.

She entered her office and saw a stranger sitting at her desk. "Good morning," she said. "Do I know you?"

"Ruslei Felen," the stranger said. "Your replacement."

"My what? Where is Serla? What do you think you're doing?"

"Serla was appointed in Turenay with the same letter that appointed me here," Felen said. "Five days ago." He handed her the letter. As Senthi read it, she got more and more angry. The Temple of Mizran in Valdis, by appointment to Queen Alyse, had deposed her for incompetence and sent Felen to replace her.
"Valdis has no authority over Veray," she said.

"But the Crown has authority over the Temple. If you try to oppose the decision, I can and shall have you tried for high treason."

Senthí hadn't studied merchant law for nothing. She knew that he could indeed do that. It was probably Aylin who was behind it, the old hag. Anger rose again; she pushed it down violently. It would be inopportune, to say the least, to kill Felen on the spot. There would be several other people eager to have her tried for high treason if she did that.


"Everything that doesn't pertain to Temple business has been brought to your house. Clerks who worked for both the Temple and the Dawn have been given a choice. All but two have chosen to keep working for the Temple."

An office at home, two clerks. She'd manage. She couldn't go back to Essle-- for one thing, it would be an admission of defeat, and she wasn't at all sure that she would be able to face Radan.

She nodded, swallowed a retort and went home. Fuming inside, true, but outwardly calm. *Venla taught me well.*

Her papers from the Temple turned out to be in Radan's old room. It was the perfect place for an office, though she would have to use one of the downstairs rooms for receiving. She spent the rest of the day arranging things, pushing her anger further from her mind. She found the two clerks and saw to it that they had desks and writing materials to continue their duties as smoothly as possible. It was work, a good kind of work, and it made her feel much better.

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That evening, at Corin's table, it was almost as if she'd never been away, as if nothing had happened.
"I don't understand you," Corin said. "If it happened to me I'd be angry. Furious."

"I am furious. It's just that I've taught myself to contain my fury." She showed him the furnace that burnt slowly under the stone inside her. "When the time comes, I can use that."

They were interrupted by children -- Corin's youngest, a curly-haired urchin called Orian, seemed to have taken a shine to Senthi-- and by the arrival of food. "There's one good thing about not being Mighty Servant any more," Senthi said. "I can take up fencing again."

"Will you be in the competition?"

"Perhaps not here, certainly not this year. I might go to Turenay, though." She didn't want to go to Valdis or Essle, not soon at least. Especially not for the fencing competition where she would be in plain sight of everyone.

Now that Senthi had all her time available for the Dawn, it was a good opportunity to see what could be improved, where she could do more profitable business, what she had better leave to Radan in Essle. The clerks respected and feared her: she was a harsh taskmistress. She became richer than she had been as Mighty Servant. For the Guild, her change of status didn't appear to make a difference. She was still their grand master; they were still her people. She made a point of knowing everything going on in Ryshas, especially about the new school of the Guild of the Nameless in Turenay which attracted masters and even grand masters as over-ripe plums attract wasps.

Her hair turned completely white. She wore it long, put up in a roll at the back of her head. She dressed in muted colours, greyed versions of the rich blues and violets she'd favoured when she was younger. She was no longer "the former Mighty Servant", she was "Senthi of the Dawn" or, in fearful whispers, "Senthi of the Guild". The whispers had first become fearful when news of the queen's death had come to Veray in the summer after Senthi's deposition as Mighty Servant, together with the rumour
that Senthi had been one of the last people to be granted an audience. She did nothing to discourage the rumours.

On the fencing ground she again became a force to be reckoned with. She didn't enter in any competitions, however. The games in Turenay were before Midsummer, at a time when she wanted to be in Veray with the Guild.

All in all, her life was better than it had been when she was Mighty Servant. Even her responsibility as head of the Guild lay lightly on her, until Corin stormed into her office one day. "You should have prevented it!" he shouted.

"What are you talking about? How can I prevent something if I don't even know what it is?"

"The brat ran away. It's your fault. At least it's your job to get him back."

"Which brat? Why is it my job? Calm down, Corin. I'll have someone bring you a drink."

Sitting down, with a cup of wine in his hand, Corin was more coherent. "Orian. He came to me and said he'd found out I'm in the Guild of the Nameless and he's not going to spend one more night in the same house. I sent him to his room, but the same day he's gone."

"True to his word. How old is he now, about ten?"

"Almost. Those Brun kids must have been talking to him. I don't know what's come over him. His brother never did such a thing, not even when he found out he was gifted."

"Is Orian gifted?"

"I was beginning to suspect it. In fact I was about to ask you to have a look at him. You should already have done that."

"Usually it doesn't show yet at that age."

"Still. It's your job to spot it early. And I expect you to find him."

"That should be possible. A nine-year-old boy isn't likely to travel fast. When did he leave?"

"Eight days ago."
"Eight days? Why on earth didn't you come to me earlier?"

Corin hung his head. "I thought I'd look for him by myself first."

"And when you didn't find him, you thought you'd blame me for it? Sorry, Corin, I'll look as far as I can, but I'm not going to run after your brat if you can't control him in the first place." And even if the boy had gone on foot, Senthi couldn't look far enough to find him on the road now. He wasn't in Turenay, probably not even in Ryshas any more. "I can't find him," she said. "Either he's too far away, or he got himself killed on the way."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"What am I going to do? I've done what I can. He's your son. If you want him back, you can find him yourself."

Senthi bent over her work, ignoring Corin. He continued to fume at her for a while, but eventually went away. They didn't speak again, except on Guild occasions when they couldn't avoid it. Both of them were stubborn enough to wait for the other to make amends; neither of them did for years. Orian did not come back, and Senthi did not look for him again.

Then, in Senthi's fifty-fourth year, one of her informants in Turenay told her that Raisse had come back to live there, a fully fledged grand master.
Chapter 37

The woman who left Senthi's house some time before Midsummer was so unlike Senthi that the clerks didn't recognise her. They would leave at the end of the working day, thinking she was upstairs in her private rooms and expecting her to leave early the next morning, before they came in.

Mialle, the young wainwright Senthi had been training to replace her in the Midsummer festivities, was the only one who knew about the disguise. Senthi had practised until Mialle couldn't even tell that she was gifted, let alone recognise her by the pattern of her mind. They'd practised fencing that way as well. Senthi had honed her distinctive style down to the barest minimum, so she could pass for anybody. It turned out to be very hard to keep up the disguise while concentrating on her moves. It would be much harder among strangers in Turenay, when she'd also want to look through it from the inside.

I want to see Raisse. The fencing was only an excuse, though a welcome one. Undoubtedly Raisse would want to see her as well, but Senthi wanted to be in control of whether and when that happened.

She had an inconspicuous horse, clothes in colours she didn't usually wear and a leather cap to hide her hair. And the hair was mousy brown rather than white. Nothing to show who she really was, except the master's ribbon in the hidden pocket of her shift.

It was tempting to do the same thing in Turenay that she had done before: round up the Guild and assert herself as grand master of all
Ryshas. *That's not what I'm here for. And it would blow the disguise.* The Guild of Archan was indeed stronger than it had been when she'd put Meran in his place, but the Guild of the Nameless was many times stronger than that. Two full-blown grand masters, another one who was maimed in some way but did have the gift --Riei!-- and a youngster who was likely to grow into a grand master as well if Senthi let him. And the whole school and everything around it, of course.

Riding into town, she was gratified that nobody recognised her, though she met several people who knew her real self only too well. She asked a journeyman in the Guild of the Nameless with a sword at her side where to enter for the fencing. The young woman didn't bat an eyelid as she gave directions.

Senthi put her name down as Ainei Vauri from Essle. There were so many people from Veray on the list that she didn't want anyone to wonder why they'd never seen her there. And it would enable her to use her southern accent to disguise herself still more. After a trial fight with one of the swordmasters --she'd seen him in Veray, but she didn't think he'd recognise her as she'd never been in the competition there-- she was put in the first class, somewhat to her surprise.

She had one day until the matches started. Not hers yet, but she wanted to be there to get the feel of the place. And perhaps she'd see Raisse or Riei without being seen. It was strange not to be attending to Guild business so close to Midsummer, and she had no trading to do either. All she could do was browse the market stalls and watch the people.

Watching through the disguise tired her more than she'd expected. It sat on her like a heavy cloak, like a helmet with only a slit to look through. She went to bed early, briefly considered taking the disguise off, but decided not to; one never knew who might barge in.

She slept badly, dreaming about gods arguing, though it was probably just her own anxiety. Then, of course, she overslept and arrived at the fencing ground too late to hear the names called. It was the junior class, four pairs at a time, probably the preliminary rounds. One boy stood out immediately: not only because he clearly was the Nameless' bright young
man, but also because he was really very good, perhaps better than Senthi herself had been at that age. He'd tied his mop of curls back from his forehead, but wisps came out from under the headband and made him toss his head every time they reached his eyes. It suddenly reminded Senthi of Laran, who had done the same though his hair had been straight.

"Who's the boy?" she asked the man next to her.

"Orian, don't know more names. He's at the Guild school. I don't think he's got any parents, at least not here."

Oh yes, he's got parents all right. So it was Corin's son. If he was here, competing in a fencing match under his own name, he was either confident that Corin wouldn't come looking for him even if someone brought the news to Veray, or as good as ready to declare whose son he was. Or both. He looked very confident, brazen, even more so than most teenage boys. Well, she wasn't going to be the one to tell Corin that his runaway brat had joined the Guild of the Nameless.

Orian won the bout convincingly. He bowed flamboyantly to his opponent, then to the audience, with a flourish in the direction of one corner of the field where, presumably, people from the school were standing. Raisse. Senthi hadn't noticed her earlier; she didn't know whether she'd been there all the time, hidden, or had just arrived. Her shoulders tensed. Part of her wanted to fight, to attack before Raisse recognised and attacked her. Her more rational side thought of the disguise that Mialle hadn't been able to see through even though she'd known about it.

If she did have to fight Raisse, she wanted to do it on the Midsummer night itself, when she was at her strongest, when Archan was strongest in her.

Senthi wandered through the streets of Turenay, too restless to stand still and watch the fencing any longer, until her feet got too tired to walk and she sat down outside an inn. Gods, what am I doing here?

My work. It was the voice of Archan. She started; she hadn't expected an answer.
She would have to fight Raisse, then.

The benches in front of the inn filled up with noisy young people—presumably students, they were all in the Guild of the Nameless—talking excitedly about Orian, who had won the round and would compete again in the afternoon. Senthi hid herself deeper in her disguise, though they were ignoring her anyway. She wanted to leave, but her body didn’t cooperate: it took a lot of effort to get up. *What I need is a warm bath.* Well, there was no shortage of baths in Turenay.

Up to her shoulders in warm water, she lost most though not all of the stiffness. She considered going to the fencing school to look for someone to give her a practice bout, but everyone was probably at the grounds to watch. *There’s nothing for it but to wait until tomorrow.* Waiting wasn’t her strong point, she preferred working, but any work she could do now would give her away.

Another night of tossing and turning left her less than fit in the morning, but it would have to do. She didn’t really have a stake in the fencing itself, though it would be an annoyance to lose in the first round. As long as she lost with dignity, even that didn’t matter much.

She faced her first opponent with grim determination. He was a teacher from the Guild school, some ten years younger than herself. He mirrored her style exactly. As she was trying to fight in a style not her own, that was confusing as well as annoying. She marshalled everything she had and won by a hair’s breadth.

When she stood panting and wiping the sweat off her face in the middle of the ground, one of the judges came up to her. "I request that you refrain from using *semsin,*" she said.

"I wasn’t using *semsin* to fight," Senthi protested. "Only to protect myself."

"Use of *semsin* is forbidden," the woman said stubbornly. She looked like an elderly version of Raneth Velain, short and slight with hair that had once been red, and just as determined. Suddenly it came to Senthi who she must be: Rusla astin Brun, the principal of the Guild school, the late Lord Ayran’s daughter, whose mother had been of the House Velain.
"As you did not use semsin to win this fight," Rusla went on, "you will not be disqualified. This is only to warn you."

Senthi nodded wearily and dropped the protection, but not the disguise itself. Rusla didn't object. Senthi couldn't tell whether she really didn't notice or only thought it too much trouble to keep complaining about something that didn't do any harm.

Her next opponent was already waiting. This was one she'd heard about: Arin astin Hayan, Lady Ryath's younger brother. He didn't look like a daunting fighter with his paunch and balding head, but he was fast. Incredibly fast. When Senthi blocked him on the left, he was already coming from the right. He drove her into a corner and disarmed her, waiting patiently for her to pick up her sword. Then he disarmed her again, with hardly more than a flick of the wrist.

"You're making fun of me, aren't you?" she asked.

"I intend to beat you." He let her pick up her sword again, and disarmed her again.

They shook hands, friends for a moment, and accepted towels and jugs of water. Arin was immediately surrounded by several people. Senthi stood to one side alone.

The ground began to empty. Senthi found a place to sit down and drink the rest of the water. She knew she should really eat something, but she couldn't face the idea of going somewhere crowded --and there was no place in town by now that wasn't-- and ordering it. Instead, she sat on the sand and collected herself, taking power from the soil. River sediment, gravel, shingle, nothing really solid, but at least it was earth and it sustained her.

*Do my work,* the voice of Archan had said. But the time had not come yet-- or had it? She looked for Raisse with her mind and found her in a large group of her own Guild, presumably eating. If Senthi started a fight now she would be outnumbered, taken, or killed by the first person who managed to get behind her back with a knife. There was no trusting the Nameless and his minions. She could demand a formal duel, but then Raisse would be in control as the one challenged. No, better wait until the
Midsummer night and take her by surprise. She had another fight waiting now, for third place.

"Cynlei Vurian astin Brun. Ainei Vauri." The fight was there.

The man Senthi found opposite her had almost as flamboyant a style as Orian, but more controlled. He wouldn't give ground, but didn't succeed in driving her back either: they held each other off for a long time.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Raisse, fists clenched at her sides, eyes flashing. Senthi lost her footing. She caught herself again immediately, but Vurian had already hit her.

"Vurian, one point," Rusla said.

They were at it again. It was very hard now to keep the disguise up: it was hampering her. She considered dropping it, Raisse had seen her anyway, but she couldn't very well do that in the middle of a fight.

Vurian took advantage of her slight hesitation and disarmed her neatly. The sword flew through the air and landed just out of her reach. He was as courteous as Arin Hayan: he picked it up and handed it to her.

"Two points."

Senthi took up position again. She was getting slow. Bother. Vurian didn't seem fatigued at all. She wondered if he was secretly using semsin -- he was a master in the Guild of the Nameless after all-- but then Rusla would undoubtedly have noticed and intervened. She didn't seem prejudiced in favour of her own Guild. Senthi lunged, misjudged, lost her balance and fell.

"Three points and match for Vurian."

Vurian helped her up and grasped her hand. "Thank you for a good match." He was taken off the field by friends, a woman who was clearly his wife or sweetheart, students. Senthi was again left alone.

It wasn't long until he came back for her. "We're going to the baths, all the competitors. Come on, you know you want one as well."

She did. Gods, she wanted a bath badly. Only she didn't know how much longer she could keep the disguise up, especially with no clothes to
hide in. "But who wants me?" she said. The words came out of her mouth without thinking.

I want you, said the voice of Archan. It sounded strangely hollow, as if it echoed in a large empty hall.

I shall want you. But not yet, said the voice of Naigha.

I want you back, said a voice that she hadn't heard for a long time.

She shook her head to banish the voices.

"All of us do," Vurian said. She followed him and the others to the bath-house.
Chapter 38

The bath water was exactly right. The wine was good. The conversation was pleasant. None of those things made Senthi feel better.

Vurian was trying to draw her out. While that had made him tell her quite a lot about himself he'd learned hardly anything about her, except that she was fifty-three and in the Guild of Archan. He, on the other hand, was quite poor in spite of belonging to the richest family in the country, living on a teacher's wage and a minimal allowance from the family, he was getting married at Midsummer to the woman who had kissed him on the field, and his parents lived in the far west but he hadn't been home since he was eleven.

"You remind me of someone," Senthi said, frowning.

"You remind me of someone too, and if you are that someone you have probably seen me before. Have you ever been to Valdis to work on account books in the palace?"

"Why, yes," Senthi said, too surprised to watch her words.

"And did you meet Master Jilan, the doctor?"

"Yes. Oh! You were the young apprentice from the Plains. You were frightfully thin. Starved. He sent you to school the next day."

"Practically the next day, yes. I never got the chance to be a royal page and I'd have liked that so much," he said with a grin. "If Rava and I ever have a son I'll send him to court to be a page. If he wants to, that is."
He pushed himself out of the water with a huge splash and reached for a towel. "If I stay in here any longer I'll shrink. Do you need a hand?"

"I'll manage." Senthi climbed out as well.

Most of the others were already waiting at the door, dry and dressed.

"Come to my house," Vurian said. "Third prize was a cask of wine, we might as well drink it before it goes off."

They piled into Vurian and Rava's room-and-a-half over the fencing school, all the people who had competed in the highest class with assorted hangers-on. Somehow, Senthi ended up next to Vurian again, leaning half against him on the floor near the fire. Her left side was cold, her right side toasted, because someone was frying sausages and had stoked up the fire very hot.

"Ah, that reminds me of when I was a student in Ildis," Vurian said.

"You studied in Ildis too? So did I. Much earlier than you, obviously, I think you hadn't been born then. We had King Athal at the time." The wine was loosening her tongue; she'd have to keep a tighter rein on it.

People started drifting away. Arin and Ryath Hayan excused themselves early, because they still had an hour's ride to get home. Some of the others collected cups and plates. "I'll take these back to the Apple, shall I, Vurian?" someone asked. "I'm passing there anyway."

"I'd wash them first if I were you. They were good enough to lend me two dozen of each, they shouldn't have to clean them."

The young man grabbed a bucket and started for the door. He was almost bowled over by someone who barged in and pushed the door into his face with force. "Vurian! What do you think you're doing, having Senthi in your house as if she's just anyone? I shall never speak to you again!"

It was Raisse and she was furious. Senthi tried to make herself invisible, but it was pointless to try to hide from Raisse; anyway, she was much too drunk, as it turned out. How much wine had she had? Vurian had been refilling her cup whenever it threatened to become empty, that was a sure thing.
"Raisse." Vurian was certainly not drunk. "When I invite someone into my house, she is my guest. I will not have you fighting with my guests in my house."

"But--"

"That's my final word. If you don't want to speak to me again, that's entirely your problem."

The door closed behind Raisse. Senthi heard her footsteps thunder down the stairs. It was amazing how much noise such a small woman could make.

"Did you know who I am?" Senthi asked Vurian when she'd collected herself.

"Yes and no. Raisse warned me this afternoon that you were here, and the woman I saw in Valdis could hardly have been anyone else. I wasn't sure of the name, that's all. I think you look different, too," he added almost as an afterthought.

"Very different." There were just the two of them by the fire now; everyone was leaving, except for Rava who was behind the alcove curtain, brushing her hair. Senthi tried to drop the disguise and found that she couldn't.

"Never mind, I can see you."

"Aren't you going to get into trouble with Raisse?"

"Ultimately, no. She may be my best friend but she should know what she can and can't do in my house."

"Raisse is your best friend?" Senthi was appalled. That ugly little thing with a temper like a thunderstorm. Her opinion of Vurian plummed. 

"I'd probably have married her before I met Rava, if she hadn't vowed never to marry again," Vurian said. "She's beautiful."

"Beautiful? Face like a turnip, could do with another twenty pounds of flesh on her, scars all over--" She paused, realising that the scars were probably from fighting the Guild of Archan.

"He doesn't notice people's outsides," Rava said from behind the curtain.

291
Vurian called over his shoulder, "But I'm marrying you for your looks, raven-haired beauty."

Raven? She's blonde, isn't she? Senthi thought about it some more, started to ask Vurian something, forgot what it was. She'd really had too much wine. Once more she tried to get rid of the disguise, but it was stuck. She started to panic. If only Aine were here.

"Which Aine?" Vurian asked.

"Did I say that aloud? A friend of mine in Essle. She's a doctor."

"Yes, I think you might need a doctor. You're burning up with fever. You'd better stay here tonight and we'll get the doctor in the morning. I don't think it's necessary to wake her up in the middle of the night."

Senthi nodded. She couldn't face going back to the inn. Even getting up was too much for her now. She leaned against Vurian's shoulder, staring into the fire, shivering.

He put an arm around her. "Don't worry," he said. "You're safe here."

"I know. But what about tomorrow? What if I have to go out? I can never go back to Veray."

"Wasn't that Essle?"

"Can't go back to Essle either. Not to Valdis, not to Lenay, not to Tilis, not to Ildis. Gods, I wonder what became of Loryn."

"Loryn from Ildis? The grand master of the Royal Guards?"

"That one."

"Raisse killed him. After he'd almost killed her."

Senthi sighed. "They're all dead. Loryn is dead. Venla is dead. Ruzyn is dead, Rovan is dead. And Aidan is probably dead. Hinla is dead, Vauri is dead. Laran is dead. Athal and Alyse are dead. Rhun is dead-- he killed Fian and I killed Rhun. I should have killed Riei, but I let her live. My mistake."

"It's never a mistake to let someone live," said Vurian very gently. He stroked her hair. She managed to use his touch to let its natural colour come back: the drab brown that was part of the disguise drained out of it and the white came through.
"You have splendid hair." He sounded surprised.

"It's all white," Senthi said. "No colour at all in it. Nothing bright."

"It's bright in itself," Vurian said. "Believe me."

She was drifting off to sleep. She vaguely noticed that Vurian left the room for a moment, then put something on the floor next to her and eased her onto it. A straw pallet, she thought when it crackled under her weight. He put a blanket over her and, as if it was a completely natural thing for him, protected her with a shimmering seal. She started to protest, but slept before she could do that.

*=*

She was walking through an interminable passage. By the glazed floor-tiles she could tell that it must be in her inner stronghold, but it wasn't any part of it she recognised. All the same, it wasn't frightening, which surprised her-- she was strangely dissociated from the part of herself that might be frightened.

The further she went, the more chipped and cracked the tiles became, making the floor uneven and treacherous. "I'm cracking," she said, and that made her laugh. Her laughter echoed hollowly from the bare stone walls.

There seemed to be no way to go but forward. She didn't dare look behind her, because she wasn't sure that the world existed beyond her field of vision. There was an empty feeling to it.

She went on. The walls looked downright dingy now, almost in danger of falling down. In fact a piece of stone did fall down, right in front of her feet, when she took another step.

I can't stop to mend it, she thought. But she had to mend it, or it would all come down on her head. There were larger cracks in the floor than there had been earlier, some with small green tendrils growing through. A sound of trickling water reached her ears, barely perceptible, growing louder ahead of her. She went faster, worried, unable to stop.
Eventually she came to a place that was open to the sky. It had once had a tiled floor like the passage, but grass and other growing things were taking over. This place was the size and shape of her great hall. It looked the way her great hall would look if her stronghold was in ruins.

Now she could also locate the sound of water: a little stream, no more than a trickle, finding its way over the broken stones. She sat down, suddenly exhausted, and let it flow over her hand. It was ice-cold. The hand in the water looked strange, small and pale, almost a child's hand. She looked down: her body was that of a girl barely into puberty, dressed in a loose flowing garment that came to her knees.

"Exciting, isn't it, ruins," said a voice behind her, and it was the same voice that she'd heard earlier, the voice that had said *I want you back*. She turned and looked, and the world not only existed, but it was lush and green, full of trees and enticing pools of clear water and yellow irises growing among the reeds. There was a boy standing there, as if he'd sprung from the ground itself, barefoot and in outgrown threadbare clothes. He looked about eleven, as she must too, and when she looked at him closely she recognised him. It was Jilan's apprentice, the boy from the west, what was his name again? Vurian astin Brun. No, it couldn't be Vurian, the real Vurian was grown up, she'd lost a fencing match to him. It must be Timoine pretending to be the young Vurian.

"Timoine?"

"If you like." He started to climb the ruined walls.

"Hey!" Senthí scrambled after him. "You'll break it!"

"It's broken already, silly. That's what a ruin *is*. Come on, there's a great view from up here."

"But I have to mend it!"

"You can't. It's too big. You can't build a castle all by yourself. Not even the two of us."

"It was me who built it in the first place."

"Yeah? How long did that take you?"
Senthi was taken aback. She needed her fingers to count on. "About forty years, I think."

The boy almost fell off the wall laughing. "Look at it! Look at yourself! Can it really be you who built this?"

He was right, of course. She was a child, she hadn't had forty years to build the castle in, let alone all the time it would have taken to fall into ruin. "Well, no."

"We'd better explore, then. Come on!" He held out his hand to pull her up on the wall. It was really a great view: the Hundred Rivers in all their glory, the sun through a haze, mist rising from the water.

Senthi stood agape, transfixed. "That's my place," she said. "My real place is there."

"Well, what's keeping you?" He was down on the other side and ahead of her already, making splasy noises in the mud with his bare feet. She followed, more slowly, because she appeared to be wearing shoes. It was much easier once she'd taken them off. It became a game, a chase, a romp. Both of them got very wet.

They came to a small pool, sheltered by willows that threw their crooked shadows over the softly rippling water. "Here it is," Senthi said and hauled herself into the crown of the nearest tree. She looked back at the boy and saw that the land stretched in that direction unbroken, not a sign of the castle or any building.

"It's gone! The castle is gone!"

"It's there when you need it," the boy said. "You don't need it now."

She knew that it was true. She leaned back against the branches with a contented sigh. "I never knew this was still there," she said. "I can't believe it. It's still there."
Chapter 39

The water was rising. It rose to engulf the tree she was sitting on. It pulled her under, she could not breathe, she was dying for lack of air. It was impossible to swim; the current was too strong for that. It grew warmer, hot, unbearably hot. If it had been fire she could have controlled it, but in spite of the heat it was still water.

Someone was calling her name. It was an unfamiliar voice, not one she had heard on the fencing ground, an insistent voice. She could hold on to it and pull herself up as if on a branch. She surfaced, gasping for breath, with a cold feeling all over her body. The voice was saying, "You can stop now, Rava, we've got her back."

She had no strength to open her eyes yet. She looked around with her mind instead. Vurian and Rava were there and a grand master in the Guild of the Nameless. It wasn't Raisse: this one's presence was much less objectionable. Soothing, in fact, for all she was one of the enemy.

"Senthi? Are you awake?"

She forced her eyes to open. The voice and the not very objectionable mind belonged to a drab-looking woman. She wore a braid over one shoulder as if she were a priestess of Naigha, but her clothes were dark green. "I'm Leva. I'm the doctor. Sorry I used your name, but I had to call you."

"Never mind." It was even harder to speak than to open her eyes. "What...?"
"You had a fever." That was Vurian. "You were feverish already when you went to sleep, but it became much worse in the night and we called the doctor."

"We almost lost you," Rava said. She had a sponge in her hand. That accounted for the cold feeling: she'd been sponging Senthi down to draw the fever out.

Leva held out a cup that steamed a little. "Hold her up, someone. This is for the fever. Watch out, it's bitter."

"Willow bark," Senthi said weakly.

"Yes, mostly, and some other things. It won't kill you and it will probably make you feel better."

_Fools, every one of them. It would be so easy now to kill me._ She drank the potion. It was indeed bitter. She couldn't detect any poison in it, other than herbs against fever that could be poisonous if one took too much. "Why don't you kill me?"

Leva looked appalled. "I'm a doctor."

"But I'm the enemy."

"You, personally, are not my enemy. Right now you're my patient and a very sick one at that. Lie back and let it work."

The potion did make her feel better after a while. Leva had left, saying "call me if you need me", and Rava had gone out with a shopping basket. Vurian was sitting at the table, writing.

"Vurian?"

"Yes?"

"That wasn't only a fever, was it? I had such a strange dream."

"I know."

"You know? Were you really there, then?"

"I first saw you in the courtyard. I was keeping watch, and when you looked as if you were in agony about something I touched you and-- well, I got drawn in, I suppose."
So it hadn't been Timoine. Or had it, after all? Gods tended to use people for their purposes. She had let gods use her often enough when it was needed.

"What happened when the water rose?"

"I couldn't get to you soon enough. It was all I could do to keep you from being carried away completely while Rava got the doctor."

"No, I mean, what happened? Was it just the fever I was fighting?"

"Perhaps it was an attempt by the enemy to destroy you."

"Who, Raisse?"

Vurian laughed. "Would Raisse do it by water? Well, perhaps torrents of rain in a thunderstorm, but surely not the river." He paused, gestured with his hands as if he wanted to catch the words out of the air. "Leva says it may be your own master trying to turn you against yourself."

"Archan?"

He nodded. "Taking what's uniquely yours and corrupting it."

"But he said he wanted me. He called me his faithful servant."

Vurian snorted. "Faithful tool, more like. To break when it's no longer useful."

At first she couldn't believe that Archan would break her, that he would even want to break her. But on the other hand, she had been a less than useful tool. He was completely within his right to destroy her, as Senth would have been within her right to destroy Radan if he had disobeyed her. There were few people --none, in fact, any more-- with authority over Senth. Archan would have to do the work himself.

"I won't fight him any more, then," she said. It was hard to say, to put into words what she knew to be true.

Vurian's face slowly took on an expression of shock and horror. "You mean you're going to let him destroy you just like that?"

"Of course. I'm not useful any more. It's what happens." She swallowed to make her voice behave. "Most of the time there's a human agent, but there's nobody for me. I should perhaps fight Raisse and let her kill me."
"No way you're going to make Raisse an agent of the Nameless!" He was not only shocked and horrified now, but furious as well.

Senthi closed her eyes and sighed. "I wish you had let me die," she said.

He took her by the shoulders and shook her. "Senthi! Come out of it! Don't give in. We want you."

"What 'we', you and Rava, or the Guild of the Nameless, or who else?"

"Anshen would have you if you asked. Gladly. But I was talking about Rava and myself, and Leva as well, in fact. You're too good a person to waste."

"I'm not good. I was a rotten Mighty Servant. I didn't do the work I was assigned."

"I understand that you were an excellent Mighty Servant, and that you were only put aside because you made one fatal mistake. It's a family story, of course, about Aunt Aylin, almost a legend. I think, now that I've seen you, that the story paints you a lot blacker than you actually were."

"I'm not talking about that kind of work. I should have eliminated Raisse, not stood around on the fencing ground enjoying myself. I should have taken Riei for our side all those years ago."

"You tried, didn't you? To take Riei, I mean. You screwed that up, but you did a good deed as well: you left her alive to heal. Leva is working on her. She can't be cured completely, but she'll live a normal life again."

"But I should have fought Raisse instead of bothering with all the get-up."

"You'd have lost, I can tell you that. By the way, did you really enjoy yourself in the fencing match?"

"Why, yes," she said, surprised.

"I'd like another bout with you when you're well."

"I'm out of practice. I haven't been in training since before I became Mighty Servant in Veray."
"That's nonsense, and you know it. You must have been training for a year at least to perform like that. Especially under all the protection. Leva couldn't lift it. She said you'd probably been wearing it for days."

Senthi tried to count days and got lost. "Four days. Five, possibly. How long was I gone with the fever?"

"Two nights and a day."

"Then it must be six days. I don't need it now, do I? Everybody knows who I really am."

"Not everybody. Rava and I, and Leva, and Raisse. Possibly Riei. Nobody else that I know of, unless Raisse or Leva has been telling it to the whole Guild and I know both of them better than that."

"It doesn't matter now." She looked hard at herself. Parts of the disguise were still in place, but it was patchy. She'd have liked to have a mirror to see what it did to her face, but she could hardly ask Vurian for one. Her hair was already back to white, but by the shade of her hands her skin still looked tanned and weathered rather than pale.

She dropped as much of it as she could. It slid off her like water off a duck's back. It was surprising, as she hadn't been able to dislodge it earlier. "That was easy!"

Rava came back just then and looked at Senthi with some surprise. "You look well. Are you feeling better?"

"I think so." She wasn't sure whether it was just the relief from not having to wear the disguise any more, or whether she really did feel better. The knot in her stomach was still there. It hadn't been away completely since she'd come back from Valdis and found that she wasn't Mighty Servant any more.

"I ran into Leva in town," Rava said, "and she said she wants you in the hospital to keep an eye on you. She can't climb our stairs all the time with that leg."

Senthi had noticed the doctor's limp. "Was she in a fight?"

"No, she had an accident as a child. Never grew straight."
"I don't think I'll make it to the hospital walking," Senthi said, "and I'm probably too heavy to carry."

"I've borrowed a two-wheeler for you," Rava said. "The sort of thing the rich old ladies go to the baths in. You're going to ride in style."

They helped her down the narrow staircase and into the practice yard, where a little two-wheeled donkey-cart was waiting. By the time Senthi was in it, she was sweating and her head swam. "I do feel like an old lady," she said. "Though I don't know whether I'm still rich."

"Would anyone take the Dawn from you?" Vurian asked.

"Radan, perhaps. But he's in Essle and he can't know what happened yet."

"Ah, you'll have enough time to sort that out, then." Vurian steered the cart into an alley to avoid the bumpy cobbles. It was strangely quiet without the sound of the hooves and the wheels on stone. They crossed a street and went into another alley, narrower than the one they'd just come out of. Rava had to walk in front of the donkey and Vurian behind the cart.

The donkey didn't like it at all. It planted all four feet firmly in the mud and refused to budge. All Rava's efforts to make it go forward came to nothing. "I'll go and get some carrots," she said.

In the house they were standing in front of, something was happening. Senthi could sense it even without effort. No wonder, she must still be wide open, with all her protection gone. As she was trying to decide whether to protect herself again --the fever made her annoyingly slow-- someone came running out of the open door. Someone small and grubby, who landed right in Senthi's lap. In a reflex, she slammed protection around both of them.

The child's pursuer appeared in the doorway. Senthi was shocked, though not surprised, to see that it was Meran. He stood still for a moment when he saw and recognised her, then took a step toward the cart. "Good work, mistress. She was getting away."

"What do you think you're doing?"

"What you told me to do. Recruiting gifted children."
"By scaring them half to death?" She glared at Meran, who hastily stepped back. "Let me handle this."

"Yes, mistress." He stayed where he was, clearly fuming. She ignored him for the moment and turned her attention to the child, who was clinging to her, petrified with fear. By her size she seemed to be about ten, but her eyes proclaimed her older. And yes, she was gifted: not as strongly as Riei had been, but bright and confident.

"Listen," she said. "I'm Senthi. I'll keep you safe if I can. I'll protect you with my life."

"For what that's worth," Meran muttered.

*Gods, he must have heard about Riei.* "I'll protect her from you, Meran. And from Archan as well if I have to."

"What blasphemy is this?" He lifted his hands, oblivious of the fact that he hit the door lintel rather than reaching to the sky. "Archan! Help me against this madwoman!"

Senthi was prepared. With all the strength she could muster she reinforced the protection around the girl. What was left of her power she aimed at Meran, making him totter, but it was not enough to knock him out.

Vurian --Senthi had completely forgotten him-- came out of the shadows and socked Meran on the jaw. If Archan had been about to help him he didn't get the chance: the man crumpled on the doorstep. Senthi held her breath one moment more, but nothing else happened. *Not interested any more, are you, Archan?* There was no answer.

"Thank you," Senthi said to Vurian. "I couldn't have done that."

"He won't be out long, though. Can you walk? I don't know how to get this confounded donkey to move." Vurian tugged at the halter, but the animal only dug its feet in with more determination. "I wish Rava would come back with the carrots."

Senthi tried to get up, but found that all her strength was gone. Even the protection had faltered, leaving both herself and the girl vulnerable again. She stroked the girl's tousled hair and felt the tension in the small body grow a little less. In the dark doorway, Meran began to stir and
moan. The knot in her stomach became harder. "I don't think I can manage," she said. "And I can't handle the donkey either."

"I can," the girl suddenly said, surprising Senthi. "We have the water-mill on the Nysa. I know about donkeys." She climbed out, went over to it and whispered something in its ear. It tossed its head and started to walk.

"What did you do?" Vurian asked, when the girl was safely back beside Senthi on the bench of the cart.

"Told him I'd eat him for breakfast tomorrow." She grinned. "I wouldn't ever do that. They're tough. Much better as sausage." She curled up against Senthi, who put an arm around her. It was a long time since she'd had anybody trust her so much.
Chapter 40

Senthí never noticed that they arrived at the hospital. Before she knew it she was in a bed next to an open window. A bracing scent of roses came in with every little breeze. Vurian was sitting beside her, looking ragged.

The girl from the alley was there as well, washed and dressed in something clean and whole that was slightly too large and made her thin arms and neck stick out comically. "Oh, you're awake," she said. "I'll call the doctor." She clenched her fists and screwed up her eyes.


The girl smiled proudly. "Leva's taught me that already," she told Senthí. "I'm going to go to school here."

Leva tutted over Senthí for quite some time. "You've used up all your reserves," she said. "Not only rescuing Lyse just now, but for some time. It looks like years. You didn't have any reserves to use up any more."

Senthí realised that it had not only been the disguise, but that she had in fact been in hiding since Felen had taken over as Mighty Servant in Veray. "I know," she said "Yes, years, I think." She felt empty, in a strange way lonely.

Leva gave her a cup of hot herb tea to drink. Vervain, mint, marigold--she was taken back to Cynla's lessons in the Temple of Naigha. To strengthen both body and mind. "Are you at all hungry?"
Was she? The strange feeling in her stomach, could that be hunger, at least in part? "I think so."

"I'll have Lyse bring you something to eat. She wanted to sit with you because you rescued her and I thought there wouldn't be any harm in that. Vurian didn't want to leave you anyway." He was still there, hovering near the door.

"I like her. She reminds me of myself at that age." Leva doesn't know how much. Senthi suddenly remembered the way she'd arrived at Venla's house in the ample brown arms of Ruzyn. But I won't have her as my apprentice. I don't know whether I can teach any more. I wouldn't know what to teach.

"She can be your personal attendant until school starts after Midsummer, as far as I'm concerned," Leva said. "She's taken a liking to you as well. You'll need someone to do the running-around for you while you get your strength up."

"How long will that be?"

"I don't know. You've been taking far too much out of yourself for a long time. I can do something about the part of you that isn't whole, but not until you're stronger. If I tried now, it might well kill you."

As it should, Senthi started to think, but the thought stopped halfway. She might deserve to die, but she didn't want to die. She wanted to enjoy fencing and roses and the company of people who liked her. Archan wanted her to die, did he? Well, she'd show him. The defiance that welled up in her fizzled out because she didn't have the strength to be defiant.

"I see. I'm as weak as a kitten."

"You can start doing something about that right now. There's Lyse with the food."

Chicken in almond sauce, crispy fresh peas, bread warm from the oven, strawberries and cream. "You're lucky it's nearly Midsummer," Lyse said. "Peas and strawberries are so nice."

She started to eat ravenously, but couldn't finish it all. Lyse was happy to eat the rest. She sat down on the foot of Senthi's bed and told her
about her own strawberry patch at home that she couldn't go back to until someone did something about Meran.

"I daren't go one step outside of here," she said. "Imagine he's round the corner waiting to catch me."

"Do you know why he wanted to catch you?"

"Told me, didn't he? To make me an apprentice in the Guild of the Nameless. And when I said no he threatened to make me a whore instead." So that was Meran's game these days. Good thing that Lyse was neither gullible nor stupid.

"Did you know you were gifted?" Senthi asked. "I mean, before Meran started pushing you to join his Guild?"

"'Course I did. I could hardly have missed it with Raisse in town."

Now what was that about? "Has Raisse been recruiting as well?"

"Not recruiting. She's not an army commander, is she? She's been showing herself. If you could see it. So's you know she's there and you can ask her for help if you need that kind of help. She grew up here, poorer than us even, did you know?"

Senthi nodded. "I know. Until she was a little older than you."

"And now she's great and rich she's come back to help. If I ever get rich I want to do that kind of thing, too."

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Over the next few days Senthi grew a little stronger, though not as strong as Leva would have liked. Vurian and Rava took turns watching over her and Lyse could hardly be coaxed from her side. "Saved my life, didn't you," she said. "Anyways, I like you. Sort of a funny gran."

Senthi had never imagined herself as anybody's grandmother, not since she'd lost her son. It seemed like a good idea. "I'll be your gran if you like. Only, I won't be doing much granning until Leva is satisfied that I'm strong enough and lets me go."
Leva wasn't satisfied at all. "You're still losing strength," she said. "You'll waste away and die if we don't do something about that very soon. I'd like to see you stronger, but if we wait too long we won't have a chance. Do you mind if we try to put you back together now?"

"Er, no," said Senthi, confused.

Leva sent everybody away and asked Vurian to seal the room from the outside and stand guard. "I don't know whether, er, Archan will try anything, but if he does he'd better have trouble getting in. Do you think he can still get in through you?"

"I won't let him in if I can help it," Senthi said. "But I don't know if I can." There was a faint echo in her mind, my servant, but she pushed it away. Nobody's servant now.

"All right, I'll consider myself warned. Now open to me." She put a hand just under Senthi's ribs, where the annoying knot was. Delightful warmth spread through her body. No, it wasn't warmth, it was like a stream of cool cleansing water, dissolving the knot and washing it away.

She drifted away with it, but something held on to her: a thread of presence that must be Leva's. Don't go away, it said. You have to do most of it yourself.

Just as Senthi wondered whether Leva wanted her to repair the ruined castle after all, they reached it. The plants had taken over the courtyard completely, bits of masonry sticking up as if they were intended only for lizards to sit in the sun on. She recognised the little rivulet that she'd held her hand in last time. It was made of the same stuff as the stream that Leva healed her with.

Do you like it like this? Leva's thought came from a long way off.

She did like it. Better, much better than it had been when she had called it her great hall and it had been bare and forbidding. It was no longer a fortress: it was a sanctuary. Yes.

Then let's make it safe.

How?
The way you make a room safe. Come on, you're a grand master. You can do it.

Here, inside herself, she had her strength back. She knew that it was only imagined strength, but this was an imagined place: she could use it here.

She built new walls, not of stone this time, but of pure essence, translucent walls that shimmered like curtains of light. Nothing would get through that she didn't allow through, but they didn't keep the light and air out the way her stone walls had. It wasn't her own strength, but that of the earth below her, of the water from the spring, that she only had to shape to her will. It took moments, hours, years; she couldn't tell. The presence of Leva hovered just outside the walls all the time, giving silent encouragement.

Then, suddenly, it was finished, and she sat in the quiet courtyard gasping as if she had been swimming underwater and had just come up for air.

Good work, Leva said. Senthi let her in.

When they came out it was almost dark. Leva lit a candle and closed the window. "Poor Vurian, he's probably worried sick," she said. "It must have taken hours."

In fact it wasn't Vurian who was most worried, but Lyse; she rushed to Senthi's bedside and looked at her from all sides as if she'd turned into a completely different person. "Are you on our side now?" she asked.

"I don't think I'm on anyone's side at all right now," Senthi said. She hadn't known before she said it. "I'm free to choose." It made her tears flow freely at last, after all those years that they'd waited to come out.

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Vurian was at Senthi's bedside again, after an interminable time that she had spent crying, sleeping and crying once more. Now she seemed to have run out of tears. It was day; she had probably slept at night. Her eyes stung and her eyelids were puffy, and she didn't trust her voice, but the knot in her stomach was gone and stayed away.
"Good morning," Vurian said. "I've brought breakfast."

That kept her from talking a little longer. Gods, she was hungry. She remembered being this hungry when she had first started to use her gifts, but she'd been a growing girl then.

"Your appetite doesn't seem to have suffered," Vurian remarked. He looked less ragged than the day before, but probably only because he was clean-shaven and wearing uncreased clothes.

She shook her head, swallowing the last piece of bread and honey. "It used to make me hungry when I was an apprentice too. Working with semsin, I mean."

"And not when you were a journeyman or a master?"

"Not so much. Probably got power from somewhere else." It came to her with perfect clarity that the 'somewhere' must be Archan, and that she didn't have access to that power any more. She had renounced him, twice at least now.

Vurian must have caught a subtle signal, because he put a hand on hers and said, "You can't go without choosing for very long, you know."

"I know." She'd seen people who had sat the fence for years, trying to learn without declaring their affiliation. It took so much out of them that they went mad eventually almost without exception. "It's too big to handle alone. It needs A-" She couldn't finish it: she didn't know which name to use.

"Either of them, anyway." Vurian understood it, bless him.

"Or Naigha." Sentsi took a deep breath. "My first teacher was a priestess." She let the last vestige of disguise go, after more than forty years of wearing it. Snakes' heads, picked out in what had once been black but had faded to a dull grey, appeared on the backs of her hands.

Vurian gasped. "You're a priestess of Naigha?"

"Not any more. Not since I was twelve. But yes, I was in the Temple for almost a year and they marked me. Naigha spoke to me at the fencing match."

"What did she say?" His apprehension was almost tangible.
"She said she didn't want me yet."

He let out a relieved sigh. "Well, one worry less." He stroked the back of Senthi's hand thoughtfully, tracing the lines. "I knew they started young, but I didn't know it was that young."

"I didn't have anyone. My parents had both died. My aunt and uncle didn't want me. It's an honour, having a daughter or a niece in the Temple. Sometimes it's in the family-- there was a girl in my year who was the great-niece of the High Priestess, they'd had every second daughter in the Temple for four generations at least. She liked it." She thought for a moment. "I liked it too, really."

"So why did you leave? Or is that too personal a question?"

She shook her head. "No, I can tell you now. I had an argument with Maile, the great-niece. She was my best friend at the time. I got angry at her, and I didn't know my own power and I struck her with my mind and knocked her out. I thought I'd killed her. I was in a panic, I left, and once I was gone I couldn't go back."

"I see." Vurian was silent for a while, still stroking Senthi's hand.

She started to drift off to sleep. She thought of protecting herself, but that drifted away as well. Her mind touched another --Vurian?-- and mingled with it, dreamlike, but different from dreaming in that she knew that she was looking through his eyes, looking at the sleeping person on the bed.

A girl, hardly older than eleven or twelve. Silver-silk hair, the small body angular and unwieldy, with a fierce look on the face even in sleep. So that's how he sees me? No wonder he treats me like his little sister. No, that was unfair, he treated everyone with equal courtesy. Friendliness didn't equal disdain.

She remembered what Rava had said: Vurian didn't notice people's outsides. Did that mean that she was eleven years old inside, still, or again? The thought jerked her wide awake, shuddering.

"Are you all right?"

"An unsettling dream." She'd probably tell him about it, but not now.
Lyse's head appeared in the doorway. "Senthi?"

"Yes?"

"My brother is here. He'd like to speak to you if you're fit enough."

"Let him come. Is it a private matter—can Vurian stay?"

There was some muffled talk behind the door. "He doesn't mind."

Lyse came in with a young man who looked a lot like her, small and wiry as she was, probably in his late teens. His clothes were flecked with flour that seemed to have been hastily brushed off. He scuffed his feet on the floor uncomfortably. "My lady," he said.

"I'm not a lady," Senthi said, laughing. "'Senthi' will do. Or 'grandmother', according to your sister."

He blushed. "Senthi. I'm Arin. Lyse's brother. Father can't come, he's..." He groped for words.

"Drunk, I suppose," Lyse said. Arin poked her in the side. "Well, he is, isn't he? Why else can't he be here? It's all right, I can come back to help at the mill now they've got that Meran in the clink."

Senthi hadn't heard that yet; she'd had other things on her mind. "Have they? Good. What did they catch him on?"

"Tried to pull the same thing on another girl and she kicked him in the balls and ran to the bailiff," Arin said. It came out all in one rush, as if he wasn't used to saying so many words in one go.

"I was too small to kick him in the balls!" Lyse protested. "It's not as if I didn't try!"

"Never said you didn't try."

Senthi suppressed a grin. That's probably the way they go on at home all the time. "Well, what was it you wanted to speak to me about? Surely not that they've caught Meran."

"Well." More scuffling of feet. His soles must be worn through if he had to speak to people often. "It's about Lyse. I've come to say thanks. For taking care of her."

"It's been a pleasure."
Arin grinned shyly. "Well, thanks again." He was out of the room before Senthi could say more. Lyse followed on his heel.

"Don't you think," Vurian said, "that he was too shy to say what he came to say?"

"Absolutely. Do you think we can catch him? Or would Lyse know?"

It turned out that Lyse did know. "He's come to arrange for me to go to school, but we don't have the twelve riders. It's hard to save up with Father around."

"I understand," Senthi said.

"And Leva said to ask you if you could lend it to us. Seeing that you're rich and that we're almost family. She said you'd want to do good things."

"She said that, did she? But she's right. Leva has a knack of knowing me better than I know myself."

Lyse nodded eagerly. "And? Can you lend us twelve riders?"

"Child, I'll give you twelve riders. Vurian, who is in charge of the school accounts?"

"That'll be Ruyin. Do you want to see him?"

"Well, perhaps not now. Not until I've got my business in Veray sorted out. I think I can manage to give you twelve riders now, if you can find my purse for me."

Lyse got it from the shelf in the other room, where it had been all the time Senthi had been ill. Very trusting people here. Or perhaps Leva has keen eyes. She counted large clinking coins into Lyse's hand while the girl's eyes got wider and wider.

"Really? Are you really giving it to me?"

"Well, you've made me your gran, haven't you? Now find Ruyin and tell him this is your apprentice fee, and if he needs money from you for anything else he should come to me."

Lyse ran. Senthi put the purse under the mattress. "Vurian?"

"Yes."
It was hard to put into words, and harder to say. "I need to think and work things out. I want to be alone when I think, but I’d like someone to be very close in case something happens that makes me need them. Do you understand?"

"Do you want me to keep watch like when Leva was working on you?"

*What a relief.* "Yes. Yes, I would like that."

Inside Vurian's seal on the room, she made her own. Her strength was coming back a little, but she was still weaker than a new apprentice. Belatedly, she realised that she could use the curtains of light in her inner place. She took the power back --no use letting it go to waste, she had little enough of it at the moment-- and retreated.

The courtyard was quiet, in near-darkness, the trickling water the only sound. The curtains caught moonlight and refracted it, throwing vines and bushes and broken columns into sharp relief. She didn't see the moon itself: it must be behind the wall.

A small lizard scuttled across the ground in front of her, almost touching her foot. *Fish, there ought to be fish.* A glint of silver in the water showed that there were indeed fish in it. Whether they had appeared because of her thought or had already been there she didn't know.

*Are there any gods here?* The thought echoed against the ruined walls and the moonlit barrier. She made the barrier thin, wispy, just strong enough to stand up to something that might want to come in against her will until she could strengthen it again. *Timoine?*

And she was there, not in the image of the young Vurian this time, but as the young Senthi herself as she had sat in the willow tree the summer that her father died. "I thought you'd never call."

"I wasn't in any state to call you," Senthi said.

"That's not an excuse." Her mirror image sat down on a stump of column, hugging one knee. There was a graze across it. "You were away. I thought I'd lost you."
Senthi had no answer to that right away. She hugged her own knee, noting that she and Timoine must look like twins now except for the graze.

"I couldn't get to the place," she said at last. "There was no way."

"There was, too." Timoine's voice sounded indignant, almost peevish. "Only you'd paved it over with hard stone."

"That's true," Senthi said. "I could say that people made me do it, but I still did it myself."

"And it took you all those years to see that?"

Senthi felt the blood rise in her face. "Yes. It was foolish."

"Stupid, you mean. Fools stay mine forever. They don't desert me. Now, was there anything wrong with your other place by the river? Show me." She led Senthi over the wall in the exact place that the young Vurian had chosen --or that she had also chosen when she was in Vurian's image?-- down to the pool. It looked different, but not threatening, the way the Hundred Rivers looked different every year after the spring spate changed the shape of the land.

"Well? What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing that I can see, now. Only I'm not safe here any more. A... your brother tried to drown me."

"Did he, now? With water? Water is mine. I never tried to kill you."

"But Leva said--"

"She could have been wrong, couldn't she?" She sounded so much like Lyse that Senthi couldn't help laughing. She nodded.

"Still, I like the castle better now. It's--" she groped for words--"it's got history. My life is in it. I can't start over. I have to take my life and build on that. Make good things from the bad things."

"Now that's not foolish or stupid, it's wise and clever."

"Thank you."

"No thanks, you deserve to know it. Well, what are you going to do?"

"Do?"
"You said *take*, you said *build*, you said *make*. You can't stay only mine forever. You're not a child or a fool."

"Do you mean I'm going to lose you again?"

"Stupid again, aren't you? I said you can't stay only mine." And she was gone, leaving Senthí alone on the bank.
Chapter 41

Now when had it become day? It was early morning light, late spring or the beginning of summer, the moon still in the sky but too weak now to illuminate anything. Rain began to fall. A fat heavy drop hit Senthi on the cheek as she stood looking up at the moon.

She rubbed it away and found herself rubbing sweat or tears off her face in her bed by the window. The angle of the sunlight made it mid-afternoon. She was hot, drenched with sweat. Also, she desperately needed to use the chamber-pot and didn't trust herself not to fall out of bed trying to get to it. Vurian's seal was still in place. Poor Vurian. *Keeping watch over me yet again.* She cautiously scratched at the inside of the seal. He opened it and came in.

"Done thinking? You look a sight. I'll get someone to help."

"If you can help me get up first-- this can't wait." She relieved herself, noticing in passing that her legs weren't half as weak as she'd expected, much stronger than yesterday. "I think I could do with a wash. And something to eat."

"I'll get Leva." It wasn't Leva who came, however, but two students with towels and a white linen robe. "We're to escort you to the washroom. Do you want an arm?"

"Yes, please." Walking was still so hard that she was glad of a strong arm on each side to lean on.
In the wash-room, Vurian was pouring steaming water from a kettle into a large tub. "It should be all right now," he said.

It was perfect. "It's more than all right. You can't imagine how much I wanted this."

Vurian brought bread and cheese, holding the platter for her while she ate. "You're always feeding me," Senthi said. "What does your sweetheart have to say about that?"

"Rava says to keep up the good work. She'll want to see you again too, before we go to Gralen to get married."

"When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow or the day after. Her father is in town to buy hops and we'll go back with him."

_Hops?_ She raised an eyebrow at him.

"He has a brewery in Gralen. He's the biggest brewer in all of Ryshas, in fact, he supplies ale to a lot of inns as well. It's not easy to become a big brewer in wine country, but he's done it. I'm marrying into a rich family, it seems." As if he wasn't from a rich family himself. But he'd said something about a small allowance; perhaps he wasn't rich in his own right.

The students were back with clean clothes. Her own. They must have had her bags brought from the Crown. They dried her as if she was a child. She let them: bathing had taken all of her new strength.

When she put on a fresh shift, her hand went to the empty inside pocket of its own accord. Vurian saw it and took a small package out of his jacket, some little thing wrapped in silk. "None of us have touched it, except with the cloth," he said. "It seemed a bad idea."

The ribbon, when she unwrapped it, appeared to pulse with power. She picked it up and dropped it immediately: it sent a jolt through her hand and arm, as if she tried to stroke a cat in dry weather, only much worse. She touched it more cautiously. Perhaps it was only because it had been away from her for days on end, which had never happened before since she had become a master. _Don't fool yourself_, she thought sternly. _You have defied him._
She took a deep breath. "Vurian."

"Yes?"

"I need a weaver. A gifted weaver. One in your Guild, preferably. The Guild of Anshen." There: she'd said the name. It hadn't even been hard, only an unfamiliar taste in her mouth.

Vurian looked pensive. "Can't you go to one of your-- to someone from the other Guild? Someone who knows how it's made? I suppose it's about that," he pointed to the ribbon, "and our weavers probably don't know anything about it."

"I can't very well ask someone from the Guild that made it to unmake it," Senthi said, and felt her doom descend on her shoulders.

"Well," Vurian said, "Raisse is a weaver."

"She'll never help me." Not Raisse. Just now that Senthi had decided not to let herself die, she had to trust someone who could drink her blood.

"She'll probably be curious enough to want to learn. I'll speak to her."

When Vurian came back with Raisse, Senthi could hear them arguing from a long way off. Raisse was furious, and Vurian was conciliatory, "she's trying to stop being the enemy, give her a chance! Remember, you're not to harm her."

They were still at it when they came into the wash-room. Senthi remembered eight-year-old Raisse throwing tiny lightning bolts at her all too well; she didn't care for being hit by any lightning bolts from the full-grown Raisse.

There didn't seem to be any forthcoming, though. Raisse looked as if she was in control of herself. At the boiling point inside, more likely than not. Senthi would have to take care that she didn't say or do anything that might make her boil over.

"Vurian tells me that you have a piece of weaving that needs to be unpicked," Raisse said. "I've brought my tools. Let's find a safer place."

They went back to Senthi's room. Senthi sat down on the bed and Raisse on the stool. Vurian stood in the doorway, looking uncertain. "Do you want me to seal the room again?"
"I'll seal it myself, thank you," Raisse said, and at once there was a shell of protection around the two of them stronger than Senthi had ever seen. "In case the gods fight over you."

"Will they?"

"If you go over to our side they probably will. Vurian says you're leaving the Guild of the Nameless."

"That's what it comes to, yes." She took a deep breath. "I think I've already left." Might as well admit it now. I can hardly go back, for all I'm free to choose. Is the right choice for the wrong reason just as wrong as the wrong choice?

"Choosing Anshen can't be wrong," Raisse said as if she'd heard it. Perhaps she had. "Most of us don't get to choose. We grow up on one side or the other, or at best we are chosen. If the gods do fight over you, it means they both want you and then the choice is truly yours."

"I still don't want to run straight from one to the other because it seems to be the only way to go," Senthi said. "That would be the wrong reason, even if the choice would be right."

"Perhaps it would. Or perhaps it would be the design of Anshen who wants someone as strong as you and with all your experience on our side."

Now that's an unexpected compliment. "Thank you."

"It's true," Raisse said. "You know things we don't. About that piece of weaving, for instance. Let's have a look at it." She opened the leather case she'd brought, revealing bone needles and assorted small tools of bone and brass.

Senthi took the ribbon out of her pocket, still in the silk wrapper. "It may sting you," she said. "It stung me."

Raisse carefully unwrapped the silk and held a flat hand over the ribbon. The pulsing was still there. It subsided a little under her hand, or that could have been the effect of the shadow.

"There's a lot of power here," she said. "It's all bound up, though. How is it made?"
"I haven't seen this one made. Another one, though, for one of my journeymen. The weaver took his measure-- confound it, I'll show you." Senthi took Raisse's hand, momentarily startled that neither of them had to flinch, and showed her the making of Corin's ribbon, from measuring Corin with the red yarn to tucking in the ends with the needle.

"Hmm," Raisse said, "our weavers can't do that. I don't know if I could. And I don't know what will happen when we unravel it. It might even kill you."

"I'd rather be killed undoing the binding than remain bound to Archan," Senthi said. There. The last step.

Raisse took the ribbon in her hand and winced. "Right, it does sting," she said. She took a tool out of the case, a thin bone rod with a hook on the end. "I'm going for the loose ends first."

Senthi's ribbon was violet on blue, as Corin's was yellow on red. Raisse worked a blue end loose, then a violet one. "I'm going to unmake it the way it was made," she said. "Every step backwards. Have you grown since you became a master? Your body, I mean."

The question startled Senthi. "Well, no, not much. I'm probably a bit fatter. No taller."

"Good, because I think it may be better if the measure still fits."

Another violet end, another blue end. Then Raisse exchanged the hook for a needle. She used the point to push each row of weft free from the warp, leaving more and more of the blue threads exposed.

Senthi had expected some pain: she'd seen Corin wince when the thread was cut. But nothing prepared her for the smarting just under her skin all over, as if Raisse was scraping that off with the needle. It was all she could do not to whimper.

"I promised Vurian I wouldn't harm you," Raisse said. "Not that it wouldn't hurt." She was almost finished now, tense with effort and concentration. The power was in the blue thread, exposed in Raisse's left hand. Senthi put out a hand to take it.

"Don't touch it!"
"It's mine. My power. Why can't I take it back?"

"Because it could kill you," Raisse said drily. "It's all raw, far too strong for you now." She dropped the violet thread carelessly on the floor and took an end of the blue in each hand. "Stand up straight, please."

Senthi stood. Though she wasn't very tall, she had half a head on Raisse, who had to reach up to start surrounding her with the measure. "Can't I hold the end at least? Your arms aren't long enough."

Raisse conceded. Senthi took the end and pressed it against the crown of her head while Raisse paid out thread to fit around her body. Where it touched her skin --scalp, cheek, bare collar-bone, not to speak of her fingers holding it-- it burnt like glowing cinders, but she didn't smell any charred flesh so it couldn't really be hot.

Raisse finished the circuit with the blue thread --bare shin, feet, up the other side-- and touched her end to Senthi's. It was just long enough.

There was a flash of blue-white light, a soundless sizzle, and the thread turned to ash and fell to the ground. Power, more than she thought could have been contained in the measure or in the ribbon made of it, slammed into her and knocked her back on the bed. Raisse stumbled backwards as well, steadying herself against the window-frame.

Dazed, blinded, Senthi saw with her inner eye only, and she knew that Vurian had been right. The inner Raisse was made of pure brilliance, with sharp angles and contrasts that only served to better define her.

"You're beautiful," she said.

"So are you."

"Thank you." She knew that Raisse, too, did not see her outside at this moment, or perhaps never at all. They were no longer enemies.

After an interminable time Senthi's normal vision returned. She was still tingling with the power. "What happened?"

"I think," Raisse said, clearly groping for words, "that there may be more to this than I thought. Did you feel power being taken from you when the ribbon was made?"
"I wasn't there when it was made. But when the ribbon for my journeyman was made, yes, the weaver took some power from him."

"Much?"

"Not this much. So little that you'd hardly notice if you didn't see it in the thread. I'm sure I didn't notice at the time."

"I think it has been taking power from you all these years, a little at a time, and it came out all at once when I put the measure back on you. Do you feel stronger?"

Senthi hadn't thought to look yet. "Yes. Much stronger." Her body was still weak, she probably couldn't walk unassisted yet, but she'd have no trouble at all protecting a room or calling someone with her mind. "Did you get any?"

"It only knocked me over. I couldn't have used it anyway, it's yours."

Senthi nodded. "I wish we'd thought of having Vurian bring us something to eat," she said.

"Or to drink," Raisse said. "Well, I can lift the protection now." As she turned to face the window, her mouth fell open. "Look at that!"

Raisse's seal kept all sound out, but the thunderstorm was spectacular enough even without that. "Well, you did say the gods were likely to fight," Senthi said. "Do you think it's me they're fighting over?"

"Possibly. But the Nameless doesn't have you on his leash any more. He'd have a hard time getting you back."

"I don't think you should lift the protection just yet," Senthi said. The thunderstorm was closer now, lightning flashing in the sky right above them. "Are you sure it's not a real thunderstorm?"

"Oh, it's a real thunderstorm all right. Only it doesn't have natural causes. Believe me, I can tell when it's the gods fighting."

"I've never seen gods actually fighting before."

"I have," Raisse said. "When I took my master's trial in Ildis." Her hand went to a scar that started on her cheek and ran down the side of her face, along the neck, and disappeared into her tunic. It looked like a burn
mark, long healed. "That I wield lightning myself doesn't mean I can't get hurt when others throw it about."

"Which one was it?"

"The one you used to call by name." She looked at Senthí and grinned. "You're going to have some scars yourself."

Senthí looked down at her leg and saw a thin red line where the measure had been until it disintegrated. There should be a similar line on her cheek and collarbone. There was no mirror in the room, but-- "Can you show me?"

Raisse did indeed see her much like Vurian did, except that the body at least was clearly the right age. The red mark stood out against the pale skin like a stripe of paint.

"I'll ask Leva for something to put on it," Senthí said.

The storm showed no sign of abating. Senthí was glad she didn't have to be out in it. Even if it had been an ordinary storm it wouldn't have been comfortable, and with both gods out to get her it was many times worse.

"Raisse?"

"Hm?"

"Do you think Anshen will have me?"

"Ask him, I'd say."

"When we're out of here." As if that had been a cue, the lightning retreated and the sky cleared. Raisse opened the window and the protection dropped away.

Senthí stood at the open window, breathing the air that smelt clear and fresh, with the faintest hint of iron being forged. She started to call Anshen with the words of the Second Invocation, but found that she knew only the other verse. No use calling the wrong one. "Great god Anshen, will you have me?"

He was there. Not in a friendly comfortable form like Timoine, but as a storm of brightness, fire that filled the empty places inside her and burned away every trace of Archan that remained. She heard a voice, Raisse's or Timoine's, it didn't make a difference, say "Do you have to do
it like *that*?" and be drowned in the roar of the fire, laughter, a fierce possessiveness, *mine! mine!* that she was all too glad to give in to.

Yours. The storm receded, and she was alone in her own body again, both larger and smaller than she had been: she had become larger, but so had the world around her.

Raisse's eyes were twinkling. "And? Did you get your answer?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you got more than you bargained for."

"Right." She was shaken, but in one piece, except that her body still felt as if it had been put through a mangle. And she was hungry, and thirsty, and if she hadn't come into this right out of the bath she'd have wanted another bath. "Do you think we could persuade someone to bring us some food and a jug of ale?"

Before Raisse could make a move to persuade someone, Rava came into the room with a tray. "We saw the seal go down and we thought you might be hungry," she said.

When they were eating, Senthi spotted the violet thread on the floor and picked it up. "Can you lend me a needle?" She took off her shift and closed up the inner pocket with large regular stitches. She bit off the thread and put the shift back on. "I'm going to do that with all the others, to remind me why I don't need that pocket any longer."

"Keep the needle if you like," Raisse said with a smile. Senthi put it in her purse, the rest of the violet thread wrapped around it.
Chapter 42

Rava's father's brewery, just outside the village of Gralen, was so large as to be almost a small village in itself. There was the main house that they passed at least three times coming down the hill, closer every time, surrounded by smaller houses, barns, stables, sheds, ramshackle lean-tos, a henhouse, a round brick thing like a stunted tower that Rava's father said was the drying-house, and an apple orchard extending between the buildings. "If you stay five, six weeks you can taste the first apple wine," Vurian said as they drove through on the brewery wagon full of hops.

Senthi hadn't counted on staying five or six weeks. In fact she couldn't plan any further than Midsummer yet, and counting on her fingers she made that tomorrow. "Could I really stay that long?" she asked.

"Torin invited you to stay as long as you like," Vurian said. "And the doctor ordered rest and fresh air. They'll probably expect you to pull your weight after a while, when you're better. Anything you're particularly good at?"

Senthi had to think about that. "I can do accounts," she volunteered.

"You should tell that to my future mother-in-law. She's been doing them for at least thirty years and she'll probably be glad of a change."

The whole brewery seemed to have turned out to meet them. Young women who looked like Rava and were probably her sisters, men and women in working clothes, children of all sizes, old people with walking sticks, and in the middle a round dumpling of a woman whom the brewer
swept off her feet and lifted in the air, and when he put her down Vurian did the same.

"Senthi, this is Arni, Rava's mother and everybody's mother around here. Arni, I've brought Senthi to celebrate the Feast and our wedding. She's been having a rough time and she needs a rest."

"Well, don't stand around like that then, somebody help her off that wagon. Welcome, dear, you do look like you need to sit down somewhere quiet." She bustled Senthi to a circular seat built around a large apple tree. It was a good place to sit and watch the wagon being unloaded, Vurian and Rava greeting various members of the family, the daily work of the brewery taking its course again.

Lyse sat down next to her after a while. "I've been helping out in the kitchen," she said. "It's huge. There are eighty people living here. I met the boss of the Guild, that's Ervan, he's married to Rava's eldest sister." She broke the seed-cake in her hand in two and handed Senthi half. "I'll get you something to drink."

"I suppose they have ale here," Senthi said.

Lyse grinned and ran off again. When she came back with a jug, it wasn't ale but apple juice barely starting to ferment. "This," she said, putting a finger in and licking it, "is going to be apple wine when it grows up."

"Let's not give it a chance to grow up. I think I like it better like this."

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Later, when one of Rava's sisters had taken Senthi to a room looking out on the orchard and brought her bags as well, Vurian came to find her. "Will you come to the fire tonight, or are you too tired?"

Midsummer, of course. She'd completely forgotten that there was likely to be a bonfire. "Who does the fire, the Guild, or everybody?" she asked.
"The Guilds hold the wake, then in the morning they rake up the fire and everybody comes. At least my family-to-be tells me that it's been done that way here for as long as they can remember."

"Both Guilds?"

"Well, there are only two or three people in the Guild of the Nameless living in Gralen and it would be rude not to invite them. I suppose they've gone to Veray for the baron's feast, though. He seems to be one of them."

Corin. "If they're not there, I can come. It would be... embarrassing... to show myself to them as I am now, at Midsummer."

He didn't ask who would be the embarrassed party, and Senthi frankly didn't know.

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When it was almost completely dark they set out to light the bonfire. There were people from the village as well as from the brewery, about forty in all. Senthi was relieved that those from her former Guild had indeed stayed away, gone to Veray more likely than not.

The fire had been built on a hilltop, looking out over the village and the river. Senthi could just see the difference in shades of darkness. Soon the fire would be the only light, apart from the stars and the thin crescent moon.

"Senthi?" That was Ervan. "I hardly dare ask, but, well, you are a grand master. Would you light the fire, please?"

I don't know whether I can still do that. She hadn't actually tried to use her gifts since she'd let Anshen take her for his own. She didn't know whether it would be different, or rather, she knew that it would be different but not how.

Fire. The fire was still there at the core of her being. It wasn't exactly the same as what she was used to --look into that later-- but she could use it. Twigs in the centre of the pyre started to smoulder. More fire. A wisp of smoke curled up from the wood, followed by a flame and more flames. She let out a relieved sigh.
"Thank you." The Guild settled down to watching the fire, talking, occasionally singing. Someone from the village had brought a flute. Rava sat with her head against Vurian's shoulder, looking contented.

Everything was so peaceful, so safe, that it made Senthi uneasy. "Don't you think someone from the other Guild will attack us?" she asked Ervan.

"In the Midsummer night? I'd say they're all celebrating, same as us."

"Well, what better way to celebrate than to go out and fight your enemies?"

"We don't do that. And the other bunch here have never done it either."

"Yes, but now you've got me here. They'll want to punish the defector. I know Mialle. And Corin for that matter."

"Hmm, I'll watch out for it. Though I don't think they're going to try anything tonight."

Senthi hadn't intended to sleep, but she must have slept: she woke when it was light, wrapped in someone's cloak. Rava's, presumably, because she and Vurian were sharing one. They walked back to the brewery together.

"Is it today you're getting married?" Senthi asked.

"Yes," Rava said. "Mother will marry us as soon as everyone is up again. Vurian can go without sleep for days, but I can't."

Senthi, too, went to sleep again, after she'd put protection on her room. It was probably rude to do that in someone else's house without asking permission, but Ervan was still at the fire and she was too tired to try to reach him. It was unlikely that anyone would mind anyway.

Sounds woke her up. She sat bolt upright thinking it was the enemy, but it was the wedding. She dressed hastily and was downstairs just in time to see Vurian and Rava, both dressed in white with embroidered red tabards, being led through the crowd and off the brewery grounds to the village. She followed with the rest. In the village another wedding procession met them, as well as several young women in white with lace caps on their heads. The past year's brides, she understood from the talk around her. Some were carrying babies, some would have babies to carry.
soon. *I wonder how long it will take Rava.* Her sisters seemed fertile enough, but she'd probably want to finish school first.

There was a lot of food and drink, barrels of ale brought from the brewery, singing and dancing. In all the time she'd lived in Ryshas, Senthi had never seen village dancing. It was very different from what they did at the castle and even more different from the village dances in Tilis, what she remembered of those at least. She let Arni coax her to join in the simple and quiet ones, but even the music was strange, the rhythm tripping her every time she thought she'd found the pattern.

Perhaps the dancing made her especially sensitive to patterns, or it was just that she'd been waiting for it: she sensed a disturbance. It was very subtle, but when she concentrated on it she could see exactly where it was. She sent out a call for help and had Vurian and Ervan at her side almost at once. "It's Mialle," she said. "She's come to fight me, I think."

"Can you fight?" Vurian sounded solicitous, perhaps worried.

"I don't know." *She* was worried. She knew, more or less, how strong Mialle was, but not how strong she was herself, this new person she'd become. The fire had still been there, but what about the rest? Obviously, she wouldn't have strength from Archan any more, and whether Anshen would give her any strength was an open question.

"Shall I tell her to go away?" Ervan asked. "Or I can ask Torin to tell her. It's his daughter's wedding after all and she hasn't been invited."

Senthi shook her head. "I have to face her anyway. I might as well do it now."

It took Mialle three more dances to reach the village. When she arrived it turned out that she had several people from the Guild with her. Not Corin, though. Either he'd felt embarrassed, or he'd thought it unimportant, or he had cold feet. *Embarrassed, most likely*, Senthi thought.

Mialle stood in the middle of the village green, hands on hips. People were looking at her expectantly as if she was going to give a performance. Ervan went up to her and spoke too low for Senthi to hear.
"No, I don't mind if everybody sees it," Mialle said aloud. "On the contrary. I want to show all of you how much of a coward she is."

"Use my fallow field if you need to fight," someone said. Senthi remembered that he had been at the fire, a master in the Guild of Anshen. "There are two weddings going on here that we don't want to interrupt."

One wedding at least had been interrupted already, because Vurian and Rava stayed with Senthi. The whole village ended up going to the fallow field, Mialle and Senthi side by side at the head of a strange procession, pointedly not speaking to one another.

"Choose your weapon, coward," Mialle said when they'd arrived.

Senthi had hoped for that. "The sword." From their training together, she knew that Mialle could use one but that she herself was more competent.

"I haven't got one with me," Mialle said contemptuously, as if carrying a sword was far beneath her.

"I'm sure there are people here who can lend you one." Senthi looked around at Ervan and Vurian.

"Do you have any experience with the sword?" Vurian asked. He looked every inch the nobleman now, in spite of his villager's wedding clothes.

"I came third in the second class in Veray last year," Mialle said.

*It's true*, Senthi told Vurian. Good, speaking to people in her mind still worked, too.

"You can use mine, then. It should be about the right size."

Mialle looked as if she didn't know whether to be offended. "All right," she said at last.

They had to send someone to the brewery to get Vurian's and Senthi's swords. In the meantime Mialle and Senthi paced around like cats, lacking only a bristly tail. As soon as Senthi had her sword she felt three inches taller, and though that still wouldn't make her as tall as Mialle it was reassuring. Mialle turned her hand with Vurian's sword in it experimentally, scowling at it, but finally she seemed to be satisfied.
"Veray rules?" Senthi asked. "First blood or disarm three times, no hits to the head, no blows intended to maim. I don't suppose you mean to give up and I know that I don't, and it's not done for either of us to kill the other at a wedding. I suppose you came to prove your point, not to take revenge. There are much too many people here who would be ready to take revenge on you."

"I will kill you if I get the chance, traitor," Mialle said.

"Watch your words. I didn't betray anyone. You may call me a defector if you have to call me anything other than my name."

"A distinction without a difference." They were at it without warning. Senthi belatedly realised that they hadn't actually said whether or not they were going to use semsin. Mialle at least was using everything she had. She doesn't know if I still can, she thought. That might be useful.

Mialle was strong but sloppy: exactly what had made her come third instead of first in Veray. Senthi held back, using only her defence at first, attacking very cautiously when Mialle had worn herself down a little. She still wasn't using semsin at all, while Mialle wielded a sword glowing with power. I wonder why. Showing off? It won't hurt me any more than a plain sword, even if she does hit me. It's just wearing her out faster.

It would have been different if Senthi had been protecting herself with semsin. Perhaps Mialle thought she was both protecting herself and disguising it: that was what they'd practised, after all. Let her think that.

Mialle did hit then, a tiny nick in the sleeve of Senthi's shirt that would have damaged her protection if she'd been wearing any. It startled Mialle so much that she let Senthi disarm her easily.

"You're naked!"

"On the contrary, I am wearing hose and a doublet," Senthi said. "Shirt, loincloth, boots. No leathers, though, and no semsin either. Does it surprise you?"

"Well, yes. I'd have thought the Nameless would protect you better."

"I haven't asked him for any protection. This is my fight, not his. Anshen has fought for me already, now it's my turn to prove myself."
Mialle was more cautious after that, until she couldn't bear Senthi's patient defence any more and struck out wildly. Senthi felt something hit her head, and everything went black.

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"What happened?" she said, when she found herself in an unfamiliar room, lying on a straw pallet. Her head was very tender and she didn't want to turn it or open her eyes any further than a slit.

"Mialle hit you on the head," Vurian said. He was sitting on his haunches next to her. "Intended to kill you, I'm sure, but something made her hit with the flat instead. I think Anshen doesn't want to lose you that soon."

"What did you do with her?"

"I didn't do anything. Ervan took her sword away for breaking the rules and gave her ale and honey-cakes to keep her occupied while she waits for you to come and deal with her. She's fuming. I don't think she dares leave, the whole village is watching her. One of her flunkies tried to get away, but Ervan knocked him out."

"With his mind?"

"No, with a ham-bone, he happened to have it in his hand. Otherwise he'd have done it with his fist. The others are so impressed that they're not trying anything either."

Senthi tried to sit up, but thought better of it. Her head felt as if someone had started a smithy in it. "I'm probably concussed."

"Very likely. Shall I get Mialle to come to you?"

"Yes, if you can keep her from killing me when she's here. I don't think I could manage that at the moment."

Mialle was brought in by Ervan and another man about Ervan's size but not gifted. She was furious, Senthi could see that, but in control of herself for now.
"What shall I do with you?" Senthi asked. "I would be perfectly justified to kill you. Vurian tells me you tried to kill me but Anshen stayed your hand."

"An unlucky stroke, that's all," Mialle muttered.

"That you hit me, or that you didn't hit me hard enough?"

Mialle didn't answer. She looked away when Senthi tried to meet her eyes.

"The Guild needs someone of your stature," Senthi said. "Go home and lead it. I'm celebrating Midsummer and my friends' wedding, and I don't want to fight you any more than I already have. But if we ever meet in a fight again, I will try to kill you."

"And I you." It was barely more than a whisper.

"That was noble of you," Vurian said when the two large men had taken Mialle out of the house. "You were in your right to demand compensation, or even punishment."

"I'm done fighting," Senthi said. "I have a few things to take care of, and then I can find a quiet place to live and grow old and let Naigha take me in her own time."
Chapter 43

The shop was deserted, though it was clear that someone had just left it intending to come back. The table in the middle was strewn with dressmaker's tools, while everything else was very tidy; someone this fastidious wouldn't leave tools out unless only for one moment. On one side there was a rack of half-finished gowns ready to be made to measure. The back wall was taken up by shelves, laden with bolts of cloth, baskets full of ribbons and yarn, boxes presumably filled with buttons and hooks and other little things, more tools, an incongruous wine jug. On the other side, a low table with chairs waited for customers. There was an appealing scent of new fabric and fresh whitewash.

"We're not open," a voice came from the back. "We don't open until the Feast of Mizran."

Senthi stayed where she was. Presently, a woman came in through the door between the shelves. "Didn't you--" She gave a little gasp. "Oh. It's you."

Senthi nodded. "I've come to make amends. If I can."

Riei looked her up and down. "You've changed."

"Yes. So have you." Riei looked almost elegant. Her gown --an advertisement for her business if ever there was one-- brought out her height and downplayed her slight gawkiness. She glowed from the inside with a quiet power, much stronger than Senthi had expected. Leva had done good work on her.
"Come and sit down. I'll see if there's some wine left." They sat down at the low table. Riei found the jug empty and sent her apprentice to fill it. "Do you think there's anything to say?"

*If she didn't want me to say anything, she wouldn't have asked me to sit down.* "Neither of us are quite the same people we were then. But I shouldn't have done it. I didn't know that when it happened, but I know it now."

"It did make me who I am now-- you and Leva did that."

"That it came out well in the end doesn't make it a good thing," Senthi said.

They sat for a while, each wrapped in her own thoughts. The apprentice came back with the jug. Riei poured the wine.

"That's a good vintage you have there," Senthi said.

"Yes, it is, isn't it? Master Jilan recommended it."

Senthi knew only one Jilan who would be called 'master' and know about wine. "Is he here?"

"Probably at the school, or staying with Rusla astin Brun. Do you know him?"

"We used to be-- not really friends, but friendly opponents, I'd say. I would like to see him again. I don't know if he will recognise me as I am now."

"I recognised you," Riei said.

"That's different. I never--" She didn't know how to go on.

"You never entered his mind?"

"No. At least--" She tried to remember all the times she'd met Jilan. They had spoken mind to mind often enough, but he had never opened his mind to her, or she to him. "No. Never." And she'd never tried to push him to do something he wasn't inclined to do, or damaged him the way she had damaged Riei. "It's still different. I never treated him the way I treated you."

Riei looked at her hands and took a deep breath. "There's something I've always wanted to know." She still didn't look at Senthi. "Why?"
"I don't really know any more. I thought at the time that it was the right thing to do." All that power. If we couldn't have it the others weren't to have it either. "I think I was too ambitious. I wanted to be the one who brought the new grand master in. And when you didn't want to go along with it, I broke you."

"Out of spite?"

"I don't know. Yes, I think so. Or greed."

"But you've grown up since, haven't you?"

"Yes." She held back her tears for one more moment. "I've grown up. It took me twenty years, though."

When they were both done crying, they shared the last of the wine. "You shouldn't wear grey and violet," Riei said. "It makes you hard and fierce. You should wear earth colours. Try this." She took a swath of forest-green material from the shelf behind her and held it to Senthi's front. "I can make you something from this if you like. How long are you staying?"

"I'm not sure. Some weeks, I think." She looked at herself in the silvered mirror Riei held out to her. Her eyes had changed: pewter rather than steel. "You're right. I'd like that." She realised that she didn't know Riei's prices, and though she had some money from selling the Veray house she wasn't as rich as she'd been used to. But if the gown Riei was wearing was any indication, it would be worth every penny.

Riei measured her on all sides. Senthi found herself commissioning a whole new wardrobe, all in the colours of sand and soil and leaves. She was still dazed when she came out in the street, and she was almost in Jilan's arms when she noticed that he was there. "I've been looking for you," he said. "Fortunately, you're still easy to find. You look overwhelmed. What happened?"

"I've just spent all of my savings on new clothes," she said. "And I'll tell you the rest somewhere private."

Jilan took her to a small wine-house in a back street. They sat in a corner that was almost completely secluded. Jilan put protection up. "The
landlady is one of us, she doesn't mind," he said. "I'd take you to the school, but they've got exams going on and we'd only be in the way."

"I don't think I should have any more wine," Senthi said. "Even if it's you recommending it. Riei had some that you recommended and we finished the jug between us."

"Well, what would you like instead? Weak ale, apple must, water, herb tea? I think they do mint and vervain-- you look as if you can do with that."

"Mint and vervain sounds about right." He went to order and Senthi used the time to collect herself. It was strange to be on the same side as Jilan. She was so used to the mixture of cautious friendship and veiled enmity that he seemed a different person. Though it was her, rather, who was a different person. *I must watch out that I don't fall in love with him.*

"You look well," Jilan said when he came back with a tray with wine and a steaming teapot. "Really well, inside and out. And I like the short hair."

"Thank you." Would she let him into her mind now? No, perhaps later. This wasn't the time. "I went to talk to Riei and we'd both changed so much that we couldn't really talk about it. So I let her measure me."

"Measure you? Oh, for clothes. She's a dressmaker, of course."

"The only dressmaker I've met until now who matches colours to who people are, not what they look like. That's why I spent all my savings. All the clothes I've got are wrong for how I've changed."

"Did you manage to get anything out of the Dawn?"

*He at least hasn't changed all that much. He still knows things.* "I don't know yet. I've sent letters to Essle. It could be anything between nothing at all and rather a lot, and I'm counting on nothing at all so I don't spend money I haven't got. I can always go into trading again, I suppose. I know the ropes."

"I have another proposition for you, in fact." He punctuated his words with his wine cup. "I'm getting too old to travel. Don't protest, I'm fifteen or more years older than you even though I don't look it. Pushing seventy. And you know the other side better than anyone else we've got."
She felt a hot flush rise in her face. "I won't betray anyone."

"You don't have to. You go places, talk to people. Our people. Or negotiate with the other Guild, because you know how to talk to them."

"That would probably lead to fighting. And I'm not going to fight any more."

"Then can you teach other people how to talk to them?"

She thought for a moment. "Yes, I think I could do that."

"You should see Rusla, then, she's looking for teachers. Where have you been all this time? I heard from Raisse what happened and I've been looking for you for weeks."

"I was hiding away at the brewery in Gralen. Resting and recovering, really-- someone hit me on the head and I had a concussion. When Leva came along on her round through Ryshas she told me to stay put."

"I know Leva, one should always do what she says. In thirty years she'll be just as cranky an old doctor as I am. Who hit you on the head?"

"Mialle from Veray. She tried to kill me but Anshen wouldn't have it."

"Wise of him." He poured the dregs of the jug into his cup. "Are you sure you don't want any wine?"

"Another time."

There were plenty of other times. Jilan stayed in Turenay for the whole season. Senthi went to talk to Rusla and got a teaching post at the Guild school. Thirty riders a year, a small room under the roof and the privilege of eating in the school dining hall whenever she wanted. The food was geared to growing children, but it was good enough: the cooking was about the only work in the school that the teachers or the students didn't do themselves.

Jilan didn't stop asking Senthi if she wanted to travel. When winter came, he went back to Valdis and left her with a nagging suspicion that he was in fact courting her. I won't fall in love with him. He's exactly the person I'd fall in love with if I did fall in love, though.

She pushed it out of her mind by working. Her letters to Essle had got answers that were better than she had hoped for: selling her share in the
Dawn to Radan netted her a sum of money that was much closer to rather a lot than to nothing at all. Apparently, with all that had happened, Mizran at least still liked her. She could have bought a small house and retired, but she preferred to go on living at the school and teach. She put most of the capital into a fund to back unusual ventures that she let Vurian administer: he had a nose for those. The fund started to grow larger after the first few years and kept growing steadily after that.

"I might as well retire after all," Senthi said to Vurian at one of their business meetings. Business meetings with Vurian usually involved food and wine and easy companionship, often with Rava and their children joining them after the real business was done.

"You'd be bored to death," Vurian said, "and you know that. You're having far too much fun teaching."

"And learning. I'm still learning to be a grand master in the Guild of Anshen."

"Funny, that's what Raisse says. Not about you, but about herself."

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Autumn came and Jilan with it. That was as sure a thing as the leaves turning yellow on the trees. Every time Jilan was in Turenay he took Senthi out and made an effort to get her to travel with him. She was sure now that he was courting her, not offering her a job, but she was still determined not to fall in love. It would be too easy a way out. She'd spent fifty years not being dependent on people; she wasn't going to start now.

They sat in the little wine-house, drinking something Jilan described as "the best of the South": dark, rich and, Senthi suspected, very strong, though that wasn't immediately apparent. "I'm going to Tilis in spring," Jilan said. "Are you sure you don't want to join me?"

"You shouldn't go in spring, the road will be washed away and the village two feet under water."

"Well, as soon as the river behaves again. The baroness invited me, we're old friends. She said to bring someone if I wanted."
It was very tempting. Senthi did want to see Tilis again, even though nobody she knew lived there now. Her old places would have changed, but so had she changed. And it wasn't as if she didn't want Jilan's companionship; he was a good friend, pleasant to be with.

"Let me think about it."

"You're thinking about it! That's better than I've heard from you these past ten years. You're making an old man very happy."

Senthi realised that Jilan really was old. He must be close to eighty. He still didn't look it, but it showed in the way he walked and there was a growing slowness in his speech.

"If you don't go this year it might be too late," Vurian said when Senthi mentioned the invitation. "You can always go to Tilis, but it's likely you won't be able to go with Jilan if you don't do it now."

"Perhaps you're right," Senthi said.

It took her the whole autumn to get up the courage to say yes. It wasn't until he was about to go back to Valdis for the winter that she contrived to be alone with him and said, "I'd like to go to Tilis with you. What shall I do, join you in Valdis when the Rycha goes down, or come with you now?"

"I'd be honoured if you came with me now. I have a house in Valdis, it can easily accommodate one more."

"You'll have to bear with me for a few days, I have to find someone to take over my lessons."

That proved to be easier than she'd thought, because Orian was in town and he didn't mind filling in for one or two seasons. "Glad to have an excuse to stay," he said with a grin. Senthi smiled; he was probably courting someone as well.

Going downstairs with her pack, Senthi ran into Lyse who was going up. "I was coming to see you," Lyse said. "Or rather, I was coming for you to see me."

"You're a master!"
Lyse grinned broadly. "Yes, isn't it funny? Leva said there was nothing left to learn that she could teach me, so she let me do it on my own and I could."

"What did she let you do on your own?"

"Take care of her latest patient. A builder, fell off the scaffolding in Broad Street, damaged spine, arterial bleeding. You can see him in the hospital, as good as new."

"Congratulations. I didn't know a damaged spine could be healed."

"It did take all I had. And Leva says even she can't do it every time, it depends on what exactly is broken. I think we were both lucky, the patient and I."

"I think you're great. Are you going to celebrate with your brother and your friends now or will you join me for a roast duck? I'm off to Valdis early tomorrow."

"I was going home, but I'm ravenous and Arin can wait."

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Jilan and Senthi left for Valdis the next morning in the wagon that Jilan had bought when he gave up riding --"reluctantly," he said, "but the old bones get too stiff"-- from Mialle in Veray. "I know she's your worst enemy, and an enemy of mine as well, but she is the best wainwright in Ryshas, perhaps in the whole country."

They had nice weather, crisp late autumn with the merest hint of frost in the mornings, almost until they came to Valdis. The city greeted them with a sleety drizzle, chilling them to the bone. "Tonight we'll be home," Jilan said. "A warm bath first thing, and then mulled wine and hot food."

Senthi realised that she'd missed the trappings of wealth, though she hadn't felt she was missing anything while living in the little room in the attic of the school. "Mmm, I like this," she said as she curled up in the cushions of a big chair with a cup of steaming mulled wine in her hands.

"Good, isn't it? One of the advantages of growing old is that you don't have to explain that you want comfort."
Jilan let Senthi use his own room with a huge soft bed. When she was between the linen sheets, he poked his head round the door. "May I come in?"

"Yes, of course."

He sat on the edge of the bed, looking as sheepish as a boy of fourteen. "I must confess something," he said. "I don't know when exactly it happened, at Ryath Hayan's house or in your office in Veray, but I've been in love with you since then."

It was a relief to hear him say it, but still a shock. "Even when we were enemies?"

"That didn't prevent me. It made you attractive in a different way--something you can't ever have, like shooting stars or the rainbow. It hurts to look at it but you can't stop looking, because it will go away if you do."

"And it goes away if you don't, but at least you see it all the time it's there," Senthi said. "I must confess something too. I wasn't sure until tonight, but Ryath Hayan's dance wasn't the first time we met. I once left a door open for you in Ildis."

He was silent for a long time. "So it was you after all. I thought it might have been, but... Well, I think I've been pushing it away. I enjoyed our friendship too much to want to be grateful to you."

She turned the bedclothes back. "You can sleep in your own bed if you like. As long as you don't mind me being in it."
Chapter 44

Jilan, like Senthi, had married young and been widowed young. Unlike Senthi he had had other lovers. It didn't make the sense of wonder, of discovery, any less. He was gentle, considerate, much less impetuous than Senthi remembered Rovan to have been-- but then Jilan was four times the age Rovan had been.

They lay in the big bed on a winter morning, unwilling to get up in the cold, Senthi's head resting on Jilan's shoulder.

"Why do you love me?" she asked.

"Because you're you."

"But I've done horrible things."

"You're not doing horrible things any more, are you?"

"You'd know if I were." She snuggled closer to him. "You've seen me inside and out. You know every little bit of me by now."

"Yes, why shouldn't I love you then?"

"Because--" Gods, this is hard. "Because I've been shaped by what I was before. I didn't suddenly become a different person. I'm still Senthi."

"Yes; it was Senthi I fell in love with. Didn't I tell you I liked you, when the queen threw you out of the palace? I knew what you'd done then. Not everything of course, but what you'd done to Riei. Riei has forgiven you, the gods have forgiven you, who am I to bear a grudge?"

"Sometimes I feel I'm far too lucky."
"I'd say you deserve some luck after all that happened. And if you're lucky, think of how lucky that makes me. I never thought I'd get you at all. Don't ever become a different person. You're perfectly right the way you are now."

They travelled to Tilis as soon as the Valda went down after the spring spate. Jilan knew from experience that the Rycha would still be high, but not hindering them any more, by the time they arrived. Senthi remembered the first time she'd travelled from Valdis to Tilis, their arrival cloaked by mist and the castle suddenly looming over the boat. This time the weather was clear and they saw the castle from far off, the round stone tower rising above the flat landscape long before there was any of the wooden bulk to be seen.

"I've always wanted to stand on that tower," she said to Jilan. "I used to dream of it when I was little. To look out over the Hundred Rivers as the lady of the land."

"I can't make you the lady of the land," he said. "Sidhan would take issue. But you shall stand on the tower and look out over the Hundred Rivers."

Sidhan, the baroness, treated Jilan with so much familiarity that Senthi wondered if she had been another of Jilan's lovers. She meant to ask him, but there was no opportunity until late at night, and then he was asleep almost at once. It doesn't matter. She shows no sign of being jealous of me. And if it's true, we're two women who love the same man, and that can only be a good thing.

Her dream was fulfilled early the next morning. She stood on the tower and looked out. It reminded her even more of the time she'd looked out from a ruined castle wall with-- she still was not sure whether it had been Vurian or Timoine, or a little of both. The Hundred Rivers under the rising sun in spring, wisps of morning mist rising from the water: she had come home.
Jilan came to stand beside her, putting an arm around her waist. "And how does it feel, lady of the land?"

She didn't have words for it. She showed him how what was around them matched what was inside her, making them both dizzy. She had to steady herself by leaning her hands on the parapet. Power rose up through the stone, bracing her.

"It's rooted in the earth," she said.

"Of course. Otherwise it wouldn't stand up. This tower is older than all of Tilis, I think even older than most of Valdis. There are a few more round towers like this in Lenyas. They were built when people lived here who knew how to harness the power of the earth in stone."

Senthi felt a fleeting pang of regret that she hadn't known that early enough to become a builder and regain the craft to put power into walls.

Ah, well. She squeezed Jilan's arm and went down the stairs with him. "The irises will be in flower," she said. "Come on." She took him down to the river-bank, finding little streams and pools like and yet unlike the ones she'd known as a child and the one inside her mind. Jilan plucked yellow irises and made a crown for her, like the sun on her white hair.

"It's different every year," Jilan said. "That's what I like most about it. It's like a person, so different and still the same."

Senthi knew that he was talking about her. "That's why I love you," she said.

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That night Senthi dreamed of Naigha, a disturbing dream about being lost in the great temple in Valdis with nobody to tell her where to go except the forbidding goddess herself. Or was it the High Priestess? She looked a little like Airyn, and a little like Erne, and even like Maile grown old and tall and thin --are all High Priestesses of Naigha tall and thin? I've never seen a short or a round one-- so it must be Naigha herself, if she could look like any and all of her servants at will.
It came to her in a flash like lightning that she didn't have to be afraid. This was Naigha. She had been sworn to her. You are my priestess, the voice of Naigha came from the dark. Senthi looked down at her hands where she expected the markings to be. It was too dark to see her hands at all, darker than in the temple where the markings had been made. Looking harder, she saw the snakes' heads appear, picked out in pinpoints of light, growing clearer every moment.

She started awake. It was false dawn, everything in the room faintly visible in monochrome tones. She touched Jilan's cheek to wake him, to share the dream. She froze when she felt how cold he was.

She sang the Song of Passing for him. You are my priestess. She still knew it, after all those years, or perhaps she knew it again.

Someone would have to tell Sidhan, to get the priestess from the village. Not yet. Not now.

Come, the voice of Naigha said.

Outside, birds were waking up and starting to sing hesitantly. Senthi put on the first thing that came to hand. It was Jilan's coat, but it didn't matter. She climbed the tower stairs slowly and deliberately, feeling each unevenness in the stone under her bare feet.

THE END