

THIEVES' QUARRY, book II of the Thieftaker Chronicles

By D. B. Jackson

Chapter 1

Boston, Province of Massachusetts Bay, September 28, 1768

He heard the man's footsteps first, boot heels clicking loudly on the cobblestone street leading toward Clarke's Shipyard. A moment later, Tanner came into view, a bulky shadow against the faint, distant glow of the comfortable homes of Boston's North End. He walked swiftly, his hands buried in his pockets. Occasionally he glanced back over his shoulder.

He walked past Ethan Kaille without noticing him, though Ethan stood just off the lane, so close that he could have grabbed Tanner's arm as he hurried by. With the concealment spell Ethan had placed on himself a few minutes earlier he could have planted himself in the middle of the street and Tanner would have walked into him before realizing he was there. Still, Ethan breathed into the crook of his arm, so as not to give himself away with a puff vapor in the cool autumn air.

He watched as the man stepped onto the wharf and crept past the first of the shipyard warehouses. Tanner moved more cautiously now, his steps on the gravel and dirt fill of the wharf nearly lost amid the sound of small waves as they slapped against ships' hulls and lapped at the timbers of the pier.

The moon, a night or two past full, hung low in the east, like some great, lidded

red eye. Its reflection wavered on the smooth waters of Boston Harbor, and its glow cast just enough light for Ethan to mark Tanner's progress as the man slipped from shadow to shadow.

Somewhere out on the wharf, amid the warehouses, Tanner had hidden a small package containing several gold watches he had pinched from a watchmaker named Charles Short. All told, they probably were worth five times the ten pounds Short was paying Ethan to recover them. But Ethan tried not to think about that. A thieftaker's reputation depended not only on his cunning, not only on his prowess with a blade or his brawn, or, in Ethan's case, his skill as a conjurer, but also on his honesty.

Unless that thieftaker happened to be Sephira Pryce. But he tried not to think about her, either.

Ethan had been working this job for the better part of a month, watching the wharves, learning what he could of the men and women who unloaded trading ships when they arrived in Boston, even making inquiries with merchants and wharfmen about the captains of the various vessels. He had gone so far as to enlist the help of his old friend Devren Jervis -- Diver -- who worked the wharves when he wasn't involving himself in more questionable business opportunities in the city streets. Diver had been watching his fellow wharfmen on Ethan's behalf, looking for odd behavior or some sign that one or more of them had come into some coin in recent days. It hadn't taken Diver long to settle on Tanner.

"He's not wearing jewels on his fingers, or anything like that," Diver had told Ethan two nights before as they sat in the Dowsing Rod, the tavern they frequented,

which was located on Sudbury Street on the edge of the West End. "But he's acting strangely just the same. Like he's hiding something. I think he's got those watches hidden away somewhere out there on one of the wharves. Or Clarke's Shipyard. That's where he works, you know." He had paused then, sipping his ale and eyeing Ethan slyly over the rim of his cup. "So how much is Short paying you?"

Ethan had laughed. "Ten pounds. And if you're right about Tanner, four of them are yours."

It was more than he usually would have paid for such information, but he and Diver had known each other for a good many years, almost since the day more than twenty years before, when Ethan first arrived in Boston. Diver had only been a boy, but he had become Ethan's first friend in the city. He had known that Ethan was a conjurer -- a speller, as his kind were called in the streets -- for longer than anyone alive other than Ethan's sisters. And Ethan's work had gone well in recent months. He could afford to be generous.

After speaking with Diver, Ethan had begun to watch Tanner as well, observing him from a distance as the man worked the shipyard and following him through the narrow alleys of the South End to a small, rundown tavern where he spent most of his evenings. The man was easy to spot -- brawny and tall, mustached and fair-haired. He spoke with a faint Cornish accent, and he had a raucous laugh that frequently punctuated his own jokes.

It had only taken Ethan a day or two to decide that Diver had to be right. Tanner was their man. The Cornishman had returned to the shipyard warehouses several nights

running, each time arriving after midnight, skulking through shadows, and crawling on his hands and knees out near the end of the pier. He had also met with a number of men who Ethan knew to be fences. But thus far, Ethan had yet to see Tanner exchange money or goods with any of them. And, on the one occasion when Ethan managed to get onto the wharf unseen and search for the watches himself, he found nothing.

That was why he had come tonight. He had guessed that Tanner would return to the shipyard yet again, and this time he intended to confront the man while he had the watches in hand. As Tanner continued along the side of the warehouses, Ethan carefully stepped onto Ship Street and began to make his way toward the wharf, still concealed by the spell he had cast.

Out on Boston Harbor, in the distance and to the south of where Ethan walked, lights bobbed on the gentle swells: lanterns burning on a dozen or more British naval ships. Several of the vessels had been anchored within sight of the city for a week or more; eight others had sailed into view earlier this day. They were arrayed in a loose, broad arc, their reflections dancing and swirling like summer fireflies. They might have been beautiful had it not been for what they signified: more strife and fear for a city already beleaguered by its conflicts with the Crown.

But these were worries for another time. Tonight, Ethan had business with Christian Tanner.

He stole toward the wharf, placing his feet silently, peering into the shadows, trying to keep track of the thief. Before he had gotten far, however, he heard voices raised. A man cried out and was silenced abruptly. An instant later something -- or

someone -- fell heavily onto the ground. A torch was lit on the merchant ship nearest the end of the wharf, and then another.

Ethan started running toward the commotion, but halted at the sound of an all-too-familiar voice. It was that of a woman, low and gravelly, so she sounded as though she was purring as she spoke. Except that her words didn't match her alluring tone.

“. . . Not very clever, Tanner,” Sephira Pryce said. “Mister Short isn't pleased, and that means that I'm not pleased either. You're new here in Boston, but that doesn't excuse what you've done.” She stood over the man, and even from a distance, even in the flickering light of the torches held by her toughs, Ethan could see that she looked lovely. Black curls cascaded down her back, shining with torch fire, and her breeches and the tight-fitting indigo waistcoat she wore accentuated the perfect curves of her body. “When you come to a new city you should inquire of those who are familiar with its customs and its habits. You should find out who to avoid angering, and who to avoid altogether. Wouldn't you agree, Ethan?”

This last she said in a raised voice.

Tanner, who was on his knees at her feet, bleeding from his mouth and nose and from a dark gash on his temple, looked around nervously and licked his bloodied lips.

“Come now, Ethan,” Sephira called, a smug smile on her lovely face. “Don't be shy.”

Ethan rubbed a hand over his face and cursed under his breath. She had done this to him before, honed in on one of his jobs at the last moment to rob him of the goods he hoped to recover, and thus of his payment. She knew the streets of Boston the

way a merchant captain knew the Atlantic coastline. She had cultivated friendships with nearly every useful person in the province, from the King's commissioners on the Customs Board to Boston's most successful merchants, from the city's barkeeps and street peddlers to its most violent criminals. Usually Ethan's jobs were too small to draw her attention. But occasionally one of Boston's wealthier citizens hired him to recover something of value, arousing Sephira's interest in his work. It had happened three years before, when Ethan was hired to find the killer of Jennifer Berson, the daughter of Abner Berson, one of the city's most prosperous merchants, and again sixteen months ago, when Ethan was asked to recover goods stolen from one of the city's wealthier shopkeepers. And it seemed it had happened once more with this job.

Charles Short's wares might not have been the best in the city, but gold watches were enough to entice Sephira no matter who made them. Ethan had known this from the start; from the day Short hired him, he had expected her to be watching his every move, looking for some way to find the watches first. But he had been so careful; he had been sure that this time at least, he had bested her.

"Show yourself, Kaille," she said, her voice hardening. "I want to see the look on your face."

On more than one occasion, Sephira and her men had come close to killing him. She was brilliant and deadly and her toughs were skilled street fighters, as good with blades as with pistols, and skilled with their fists as well. But as long as Ethan could conjure he could protect himself. He hesitated to answer her not out of fear, but rather because he didn't care to be mocked.

“There’s no sense in sulking. I’ve beaten you. Again. I would have thought you’d be used to it by now.”

Cursing a second time, Ethan pulled his knife from its sheath on his belt, cut his forearm and whispered in Latin, “Fini velamentum ex cruore evocatum.” End concealment, conjured from blood.

Power coursed through his body and hummed in the ground below his feet, deep and resonant, like the tone of a pealing church bell. At the same time, a radiant figure appeared beside him: an old man, tall and lean, with a trim beard and the dark expression of a warrior. He wore ancient battle armor and the tabard of a medieval British soldier. He even carried a sword in a scabbard on his belt. He glowed with a deep russet hue, nearly a match for the color of the moon, except for his eyes, which burned bright like brands. This was Ethan’s spectral guide, who allowed him to access the conjuring power that dwelt in the realm between the living world and the domain of the dead. Ethan had long suspected that this was the wraith of one of his ancient ancestors, a link to his family’s conjuring past. He called the ghost Uncle Reg, after his mother’s oldest brother, a waspish, difficult man of whom the shade often reminded him.

The blood that had been flowing from the fresh wound on Ethan’s arm vanished, and he felt the concealment spell begin to fade. Because Sephira wasn’t a conjurer she wouldn’t have felt the spell as Ethan did. But as soon as Ethan took another step on the wharf, her gaze snapped to his face, and a broad predatory smile lit her face.

“There you are,” she purred.

Her men, including a hulking, yellow-haired ruffian named Nigel, turned as one

and started toward him. Nigel pulled a pistol from his coat pocket.

Ethan raised his knife to his forearm again, prepared to cut himself if he had to. The toughs halted.

Ethan wasn't tall like Yellow-hair or broad in the shoulders and chest like Tanner. Those who had fought him in the past, as Sephira's men had, knew that he could handle a blade, either short or long, and that he could fight with his fists if he had to. But no one would have been afraid of him because of how he looked. He bore a few scars on his face, and his long hair had begun to gray at the temples. While serving time as a prisoner on a plantation in Barbados, he had lost three toes on his left foot to gangrene, and ever since, he had walked with a pronounced limp.

It was the threat of his spellmaking that made Yellow-hair and the others falter. They stared at his knife the way a child might gape at a rabid cur on an otherwise deserted lane. Even Tanner regarded him with alarm. Only Sephira appeared unconcerned. Actually, she looked bored.

"Leave him," she said in a low voice.

Nigel and his friends glanced back at her doubtfully.

"We're not going to touch him," she said. "And he's not going to do anything to us. Isn't that right, Ethan?"

God knew he wanted to. He could cast a hundred spells, from simple illusions that would scare Yellow-hair into diving off the pier, to complicated, violent conjurings that would kill all of them. With a bit of blood and a few well chosen words he could have snapped Sephira's neck or set her men on fire. But Sephira had powerful friends,

and as much as he hated her, he wasn't willing to hang for her murder or return to the horrors of prison.

"I don't want to hurt anyone," Ethan said at last, forcing a grin onto his lips. "Just give me what's mine and I'll be on my way."

She laughed. He had to admit that it was a good laugh: throaty, unrestrained. Had it not been directed at him, he might have liked the sound of it.

"Nothing here is yours," she told him.

He pointed at the sack she held in her hand. "Those watches--"

"Are mine." She handed the watches to Nigel. "You can try to take them, but I think we both know how that will turn out."

Ethan's eyes flicked toward Yellow-hair, who leered back at him. If he could have taken the watches from her with a conjuring he would have, but the power he wielded didn't work that way. He could hurt her, make her drop the package. He could make the wharf collapse beneath her. He could even grind the watches to dust, rendering them worthless -- this last was quite tempting. But he couldn't actually make them leave her hand and appear in his own. If he wanted them, he would have to try to take them from her, and she was right: That might not work out well for him.

Ten pounds wasn't enough to justify risking his life or his freedom. Diver might have disagreed, but Diver was young, reckless. Slowly, Ethan lowered his blade.

"Good boy," Sephira said, sounding like she was speaking to a wayward puppy.

"How did you know?" Ethan asked, his voice thick.

Her smile was luminous. "You know better than to ask me that."

She motioned for Nigel, and the big man returned to her side obediently. Ethan raised his blade again, making sure that both Sephira and Nigel understood that he was ready to conjure at the first sign of a threat.

Sephira handed her man the watches and whispered something that Ethan couldn't hear.

"How did you know, Sephira?" Ethan asked again.

"Ask your friend," she said, sparing him a quick glance. "Derrey is it?"

Derrey. Diver. He was known in the streets by both names. Ethan muttered a curse under his breath.

"We're leaving now, Ethan," Sephira said turning away from Nigel to face him once more. "Good work on this one. You made it very easy for us."

She sauntered his way and then past him, hips swaying. Most of her men followed, including Gordon, a brute of a man, even brawnier than Nigel, and Nap, who was smaller than the others, though no less deadly with a blade or gun. Ethan still held his knife over his arm, and he racked his brain for some spell that would stop her, allow him to reclaim the watches, and also enable him to make his escape.

But as Sephira walked away, Yellow-hair bent low over Tanner and in one quick motion slashed at the man's throat with a blade Ethan hadn't noticed before. Blood gushed from the wound. Tanner's eyes rolled back into his head and he toppled onto his side. Blood stained the wharf crimson and began to pool at its edge, seeping over the wooden boards to drip into the waters below.

Ethan rushed forward, all thoughts of stopping Sephira fleeing his mind. He

pushed past Yellow-hair, who merely chuckled. Reaching Tanner, he dropped to his knees.

“Remedium!” Ethan said, practically shouting the word. “Ex cruore evocatum!” Healing, conjured from blood! Usually a healing spell required that he mark the injured body part with blood. But in this case, blood was everywhere; the air stank of it.

The wharf beneath him pulsed with power. Uncle Reg appeared again, though he hardly even glanced at Ethan or Tanner. Instead, the wraith stood with his back to them, staring after Sephira. And as the blood disappeared from the wood and dirt, and from Tanner’s neck and shirt, the gaping wound began to close. Ethan couldn’t tell if he had acted quickly enough. Tanner had lost a great deal of blood in even those few seconds.

A part of him wasn’t certain why he cared. Tanner meant nothing to him. But if Sephira wanted him dead, Ethan would do all he could to keep him alive.

At first, even after the gash had healed itself, Tanner didn’t move. But leaning close to the man’s face, Ethan felt a slight stirring of breath. He grabbed Tanner’s wrist and felt for a pulse. Also faint, but unmistakable. Ethan sat back on his heels, and took a long breath. After what seemed like years, Tanner’s eyes fluttered open.

Ethan cut himself once more and drew forth a bright light that hovered over them like a tiny sun.

“Ya’re a . . . a conjurer!” Tanner said, trying to scabble away from him, although he was too weak to go far.

“Aye, I’m a conjurer. I just saved your life with a spell.”

The man’s hand strayed to his throat, his fingers probing the raw scar left by

Nigel's blade.

"Why?" he asked.

Ethan shrugged. "I don't know. Don't make me regret it."

With some effort, Tanner sat up. His arms trembled and his skin looked pasty. "Is she gone?"

"Aye," Ethan said. "But you need to leave Boston. If she sees you, she'll try to kill you again, and I might not be around to heal you."

"But--"

"Short -- that's the man who owned those watches you stole -- he wants you transported as far from these shores as possible. Failing that, he wants you dead. He made that clear when he hired me, and I'd wager every shilling I have that he told Sephira the same thing."

"So . . . so ya were goin' to turn me over to th' sheriff?"

Ethan didn't answer right away. He didn't always turn in those he was hired to pursue, and he never killed any man unless left with no choice. He had lost too many years of his life to prison and forced labor to send men away for petty crimes. And he had seen too many lives wasted in battles and in the harsh existence of the plantations to kill lightly. But he always insisted, under the threat of a painful spell-induced death, that those he captured leave Boston never to return. The last thing he needed was for word to get around the city that he didn't actually punish the men he was hired to pursue. He would never be hired as a thieftaker again. He saw no reason to trust Tanner with this information

“Aye, probably,” he finally said. “And Sheriff Greenleaf would have dealt with you harshly. But Sephira took the watches and left me to heal you, so I suppose this is your lucky day.”

Tanner’s dark eyes narrowed. “Well, then--”

“Don’t even think it,” Ethan said. “Just leave Boston on the next ship that sails. She’ll kill you. And if she doesn’t, I will.”

Ethan climbed to his feet, let the light fade out, and started to limp back along the wharf to the city street. He needed an ale, and it seemed he also needed to have a conversation with Diver.

“I suppose I ough’ to thank ya for savin’ me,” Tanner called after him.

“Don’t bother,” Ethan said over his shoulder. “I didn’t do it for you.”

Chapter 2

Ethan followed Ship Street to Fish Street and continued along the edge of the North End, skirting the finer neighborhoods. He walked by warehouses and darkened storefronts, past Paul Revere's Silver Shop and the Hancock Wharf, the moon casting his shadow, long and haloed, across locked doors and clapboard facades. The air was cool and dry, and laden with the smells of brine and fish, burning wood and ships' tar. After crossing over Mill Creek, he followed Ann Street as it turned away from the harbor and met Union.

A pair of men on the night watch stood at the far corner, speaking in low voices, one of them chuckling at some jest Ethan didn't hear. There was no established constabulary in Boston, and for now at least, there were no British regulars patrolling the streets. Men of the watch were expected to guard the citizens of Boston and their property from law-breakers. And when they failed, which they did with some frequency, one of Boston's thieftakers -- usually Sephira Pryce or Ethan -- was hired to recover the stolen items. The sheriff of Suffolk County, Stephen Greenleaf, bore some responsibility for keeping the peace as well, though he was but one man, with no soldiers or guards under his immediate authority.

In short, even with several hundred British soldiers in the waters off the city's shores, Boston remained a lawless city. Some of the men who served the watch were honest and competent; others were not. A few worked for Sephira Pryce, and took

advantage of their time on the watch by robbing empty homes and turning over what they stole to Sephira, so that she could return the items to their rightful owners, for a substantial fee, of course.

He didn't recognize either of these watchmen. This didn't mean necessarily that they worked for Sephira, but he would have felt better had he known at least one of the two. He kept his head down and his hands in his pockets as he walked past them.

"It's late to be abroad in the streets."

Ethan halted and turned slowly. Both watchmen had stepped forward, their expressions hard. They were young men, one tall and spear thin, the other shorter and brawnier. Ethan guessed that they both were armed, although they had yet to pull out either pistols or knives.

"Yes, it is," Ethan said. "I'm just on my way to the Dowsing Rod for an ale or two." His voice remained steady, and he met the taller man's gaze, unwilling to let them believe that he feared them.

"I'm less interested in where you're goin' than in where you've been."

"I'm a thieftaker," Ethan told him. "I was down at the wharves looking for a man who robbed a client."

The tall one continued to regard him like something a dog might drag in off the street, but Ethan could see from the relaxing of his stance, the slight droop of his shoulders, that this answer had satisfied him. "Find him?"

Ethan shook his head. "Fraid not."

"Well, better huntin' next time." The man was already turning away as he said

this. The second man continued to watch Ethan, but he made no effort to stop him.

Ethan raised a hand in farewell and continued on toward the tavern, glad to get away with nothing more than a few questions. He cut through Wings Lane, a dark, narrow byway that connected Union and Hanover Streets and turned south toward Sudbury.

Before he reached the next corner, a gray and white dog bounded at him from the shadows between two shops. She ran a tight circle around him, her tongue hanging out, her tail waving wildly.

“Well met, Shelly,” Ethan said, stopping to scratch the dog behind her ears.

She licked his hand and fell in stride beside him as he continued toward the Dowser.

Even here, closer to the center of the city, the streets were mostly deserted. On most nights as clear as this one, even this late, there would have been at least a few people walking the lanes, a chaise or two rattling past. But the arrival of the King’s war ships in Boston Harbor seemed to have brought a deeper chill to this autumn night.

Reaching the Dowsing Rod, Ethan gave Shelly one last scratch and a pat on the head. “Goodnight, Shelly,” he said, and stepped inside.

The great room of the tavern shone brightly with candles. The air was warm and tinged with the pungent bitterness of spermaceti candles and the sweet scent of pipe smoke, the musty smell of ale and the savory aroma of yet another of Kannice Lester’s excellent fish chowders.

Kannice, the Dowser’s owner, made the best food found in any of Boston’s public

houses and she served good ales at a reasonable price. When Ethan first met her over six years before, she had already inherited the tavern from her husband, who died of smallpox during the outbreak of 1761. A young widow, whose beauty and sharp humor complemented a keen wit and savvy business sense, she had transformed the tavern from a dreary, broken-down haunt for rogues and miscreants into a reputable and profitable establishment. Her rules were simple: no whoring, gambling, or fighting. If you couldn't discuss politics or religion without getting into an argument, you were to take your discussions out into the streets. And if anything you said or did attracted the notice of the watch or the sheriff, chances were she didn't want you in her tavern.

She relied on her hulking barman, Kelf Fingarín, to keep order and to see to it that no one disobeyed. But Kelf rarely had to do more than serve ale and stew and, on occasion, toss a drunk out into the street. Kannice was small and willowy, but one of her tongue lashings was usually enough to tame even the hardest man who set foot in her place.

Standing just inside the door, Ethan scanned the tavern for her, but she was nowhere to be seen.

"Hiya Ethan," came a booming voice from behind the bar. Kelf raised a meaty hand in greeting. "Ya lookin' fer Kannice?" he asked, his words coming out in one long quick jumble, as they always did.

"Hi, Kelf," Ethan said, grinning at the huge man and walking to the bar. "She in back?"

Kelf nodded. "Made th' chowder t'night. Ev'ryone's favorite. She can barely keep

up. I can tell 'er ya're here, though."

"No need. She'll see me soon enough." Ethan dug into his pocket and placed a shilling on the bar. "The Kent pale," he said. "And some chowder when it's ready."

"Righ'. Diver's in 'is usual spot." He nodded toward the back of the tavern. "If'n ya're lookin' fer him."

"My thanks, Kelf."

The barman handed him a tankard of ale, and Ethan made his way back to Diver's table. The Dowser was crowded and loud this night. Some stood at the bar, eating oysters and drinking ales, while others who sat at the tables drank flips or Madeira wine and supped on Kannice's chowder. But whether at tables or at the bar, few offered any greeting to Ethan. He had been a prisoner, a convicted mutineer; he was known to some as a conjurer and to most as a thieftaker and a rival to Sephira Pryce. He had few admirers and fewer friends. Then again, those friends he did have, he trusted. Even Diver.

Diver sat alone, hunched over his ale. But seeing Ethan approach, he sat up, an eager look on his face.

"Well?" he said, as Ethan took a seat across from him.

"Well, what?"

Diver glanced around to make sure that no one would overhear. "Come on, Ethan," he said, lowering his voice. "You know. What happened with Tanner and the watches?"

"Sephira happened," Ethan said, trying hard to keep his tone free of accusation

Diver's face fell. "What's she got to do with it?"

"She told me to ask you."

"What?" His surprise appeared genuine, and Diver wasn't that good a liar.

Whatever he had done to tip off Sephira had been unintentional.

"Who have you told about this job?" Ethan asked.

"No one, Ethan! I swear it!" His eyes were wide, even fearful. He knew better than to think that Ethan would do anything to him. But they had been friends for a long time. Diver looked up to Ethan the way he might to an older brother; the last thing he would have wanted was to fail him on a job, particularly if it meant losing money to Sephira Pryce.

"A girl, maybe?" Ethan asked.

"No." But Ethan could see the doubt in his friend's dark eyes. With Diver, there was always a girl -- a different one from fortnight to fortnight, but he was rarely alone. He was tall and handsome, with black curly hair and a smile that could have charmed the queen consort herself.

"What's her name, Diver?"

"She wouldn't have told Sephira," he said, more to himself than to Ethan. "I know she wouldn't."

"Diver?" Ethan said, drawing the young man's gaze once more. "Her name?"

His friend sighed. "Katharine," he said. "Katharine Chambers. I met her outside Faneuil Hall maybe a month ago. She wouldn't be working for Sephira, Ethan. She's . . ." He shook his head, perhaps knowing better than to complete the thought aloud.

Ethan had never heard of the girl, but that didn't mean much. "Have you told anyone else about Tanner?" he asked.

Diver shook his head, his expression bleak. "No, no one." He met Ethan's gaze. "You have my word."

Ethan nodded and took a long pull of ale. "Well," he said wiping his mouth with his hand, "there's nothing to be done about it now. But I'd suggest you stay away from her."

"So, we don't get anything?" Diver asked.

"This is Sephira we're talking about, Diver. It's not like her to share with the other children."

The young man closed his eyes and rubbed his brow with his thumb and forefinger. "I needed that money."

Ethan didn't bother asking why. When Diver said it that way, he usually meant, I've already spent that money.

They sat in silence for some time. Ethan surveyed the tavern while Diver gazed morosely into his empty tankard. Eventually Kannice came out of the kitchen, beckoned to Kelf, and vanished again. Soon after, the two of them emerged again bearing a huge tureen of creamy white stew. The tavern patrons roared their approval, and Kelf began to ladle the chowder into wooden bowls.

Kannice had spotted Ethan and she approached him now, her auburn hair shining in the lamplight, a few stray strands falling over her forehead. Reaching their table, she bent to kiss him lightly on the lips, her hair smelling of lavender, her breath

tasting slightly of Irish whiskey.

She bobbed her head toward Diver. “He’s been like an eager puppy all night, waiting for you to come in. I’d have thought he’d be happier now that you’re finally here.”

Ethan shrugged, grinning ruefully. “Yes, well, things didn’t go quite as we had hoped.”

Diver glanced up at Kannice before quickly looking away again. Kannice tolerated Diver because he was Ethan’s friend, but she thought him a reckless fool who brought trouble on himself and on those around him. Ethan often found it hard to defend Diver, because Kannice usually was right. This night’s misadventure was more typical than either Ethan or Diver would have cared to admit.

Kannice regarded Diver through narrowed eyes and started to say something, but Ethan took her hand and squeezed it gently. She clamped her mouth shut, and shook her head.

“I take it you’re paying for his supper, then,” she said, looking at Ethan again.

“I gave Kelf enough to cover both of us.”

She chuckled, shaking her head a second time. “Fine. I’ll leave you boys to work this out yourselves.” She kissed the top of Ethan’s head. “And I’ll deal with you later.”

This was Kannice’s way of telling Ethan that she expected him to stay the night with her. They had been lovers for the better part of five years, and though they didn’t live together, and though Ethan had made it clear to Kannice that he wasn’t the marrying kind, he would have faced down the entire British army to keep her safe.

She walked back to where Kelf was ladling out the stew and said something that made the rest of her patrons laugh uproariously. She might have been unyielding when it came to her rules, but she could outdrink a Scottish sea captain and she told jokes that would make an old sailor blush.

“You’re going to tell her what I did, aren’t you?” Diver said, once she was out of earshot.

Ethan took a quick sip of ale to hide his amusement. “I’ll tell her what happened. She’ll work out the rest.”

“Probably,” Diver muttered. “I really am sorry, Ethan.”

“It cost you nearly as much as it did me.”

“Aye, but I know how much you hate being bested by Sephira.”

Ethan looked away. Kelf was headed in their direction carrying two bowls of steaming stew.

“There y’are,” the big man said, placing the bowls in front of them. “Nother ale, Diver?”

Diver glanced at Ethan.

“We’ll both take another,” Ethan said before draining his tankard and handing it to Kelf.

Once the barkeep had walked away, Diver turned to Ethan again, a sheepish look on his face. “Ethan--”

“Leave it, Diver. Sephira’s men didn’t beat me. Sephira didn’t threaten you or Kannice or Elli and her kids. All she did was take a bit of coin that I’d claimed for myself.

It's not worth worrying about."

If anything, the younger man's shoulders drooped even more after hearing this, but he muttered something in agreement.

Kelf returned with their ales, and for some time neither man spoke. Ethan watched Kannice as she made her way around the main room of the tavern, chatting with her patrons, laughing at their jokes, chastising them when they spilled their drinks. Now and again her eyes found Ethan's and she smiled, but for the most part she left him and Diver to themselves.

"I liked working with you," Diver said at length, pushing his empty bowl to the center of the table. "I liked being a thieftaker, even if it was just for a little while."

Ethan eyed him appraisingly. "Did you?"

"Aye," his friend said. "Was I any good at it?"

"You figured out that Tanner was our thief. That took some doing."

Diver beamed. "Does that mean I can help you with another job?"

"I don't know. Can you manage to take a girl to your bed without telling her my business?"

"Of course I can," Diver said defensively, his color rising.

Ethan sat forward. "Are you sure, Diver? I'm asking you seriously. There are times when I'll want your help, but after this . . ." He shook his head. "If I'm going to rely on you, I have to know I can trust you."

The younger man held his gaze though clearly Ethan's words stung. "You can."

Ethan gazed back at him for another moment. "If you tell me it's so, I believe you."

Next time I need help, you'll be the man I turn to."

Diver grinned. "I'm grateful, Ethan." He hesitated before asking "What did Sephira do to him?"

"To Tanner, you mean?"

Diver nodded.

"She had one of her toughs cut his throat."

The blood drained from Diver's face. "They killed him?"

"No. She didn't want him dead," he said, knowing as he spoke the words that it was true. "She wanted to distract me. She figured I would save him. And I did, though only just." Ethan regarded his friend briefly. "You still want to work with me?"

"Aye," Diver said, though his hand shook as he lifted his ale.

He said something else, but Ethan didn't hear what it was. A man had just entered the Dowser, one Ethan recognized, though at first he couldn't remember where. His face was sallow and thin, his cheekbones high. He had a wispy beard and mustache, and his wheaten hair, straight and shoulder-length, tied back in a plait, looked almost golden in the dim light of the tavern. He was slight and short, and dressed as he was in a brown coat and matching waistcoat, tan breeches and what appeared to be a silk shirt, Ethan took him at first for a merchant. But the man also wore silver-rimmed spectacles, and it was these that struck Ethan as familiar in some way. It took a second or two, but it came to him. This was one of the men who had met with Tanner, and who Ethan had assumed traded in pilfered goods. Tanner had met the stranger in a tavern in the North End, and the two of them had spoken for a long time. Ethan recalled thinking at the time

that this fence had to be new to the city. He felt even more certain of this now. Before that day in the North End, Ethan had never seen him.

The fence stood near the doorway, surveying the crowd in the tavern, his brow creased, his gaze flitting from face to face. For just an instant the man looked directly at Ethan, his lenses catching the lamplight so that they briefly looked opaque. But he looked away quickly and gave no indication that he had recognized him. As he surveyed the rest of the tavern, though, the stranger's dark eyes widened slightly in recognition. He didn't move immediately, continuing instead to look around the room. But the intensity had vanished from his gaze; this was for show.

At last he crossed to the bar and slid a coin onto the polished wood. Kelf handed the man an ale, but said nothing to him and the stranger turned away without a word. Again he made a show of searching for a place to sit, but when he left the bar he walked directly to where whomever he had seen was seated.

Ethan followed the man with his eyes, swiveling in his chair and at last craning his neck in an attempt to see the stranger's friend. This second person was blocked from Ethan's view by a wooden post. Ethan shifted his chair, trying to see the person, but to no avail.

"Are you even listening to me?" Diver asked, leaning forward to force himself into Ethan's line of sight.

"No, I'm not. A man just walked in -- don't turn! I saw him with Tanner about a week ago."

"What was he doing with Tanner?"

“Trying to buy watches, I think.”

“Do you think he came here looking for you?”

Ethan shook his head. “No, I’m not sure he ever saw me. But I want to see who he’s with.” He drained his ale and stood. “Stay here. Don’t do anything to draw attention to yourself.”

“All right,” Diver said.

Ethan walked to the bar, squeezing past a crowd of young wharfmen.

“Woulda brought ya an’ther ale, Ethan,” Kelf told him, taking his tankard and refilling it.

“I know, Kelf. Thank you. I wanted to stretch my legs a bit.”

The barman shrugged and handed him the ale.

Ethan took a sip and turned to lean back against the bar, doing his best to appear relaxed and unconcerned. He could see the stranger now, though his back was to the room. Sitting across from him, his face shrouded in shadow, was a large man, who looked very much like someone Sephira would hire for his brawn, though not someone Ethan recognized. He had dark, straggly hair and a broad, homely face. His nose was crooked and a dark scar ran from the corner of his mouth to his chin, so that he appeared to be scowling.

The two men sat hunched over their table, their heads close together. The big man didn’t seem to be saying much, but he nodded every so often, the way one might when listening to instructions.

His curiosity getting the better of him, Ethan bit down hard on the inside of his

cheek, drawing blood.

[Latin] Listen, Ethan said to himself. Conjured from blood.

He felt the blood in his mouth vanish. Uncle Reg appeared beside him and power thrummed like a plucked string on a lute, making the air in the tavern come alive for the span of a heartbeat. No one around Ethan appeared to notice -- only someone who conjured would. But the spectacled man stiffened noticeably.

Ethan felt his blood run cold. The man had felt his conjuring, and already was turning to look for its source. Biting down on his cheek a second time, he whispered a second spell. [Latin] Go away! Go away! A second pulse made the tavern floors hum. The old ghost shot Ethan a filthy look, and vanished. An instant later the spectacled man swiveled in his chair his gaze passing over Ethan.

“What is it?” the big man asked, his voice now reaching Ethan’s ears. “Did ye hear--?”

But the stranger raised a hand, silencing him as he continued to look around the tavern.

Ethan waited until the man had turned to look elsewhere, and made his way back to the table, his eyes fixed on Diver, the hand holding his ale steady. His mind was reeling, though. Whoever else this man was, he was also a speller, or at least someone who had been born to conjuring. Ethan hoped that he wasn’t skilled enough with the craft to know what kind of spell Ethan had cast.

“It is nothing,” he heard the man say at last, his voice low, with a barely discernible accent that Ethan couldn’t place at first.

“You was tellin’ me ‘bout th’ ship,” the big man said.

The spectacled man didn’t respond right away. Ethan assumed that he was still searching the tavern. If Ethan had sensed someone else casting spells near him, that’s what he would have done. He reached the table once more and sat opposite Diver, though he kept his attention on the conversation now echoing in his head.

“Yes, the ship,” the man said. Forced to guess, Ethan would have said he came from somewhere on the Iberian Peninsula; Spain or perhaps Portugal. “It arrived with the others. I do not know yet when it will dock -- it does not matter really. What matters is that he does not find his way into the city.”

“Which wharf do you think they’ll go to?”

“I do not believe that will matter either,” the man said. “We are to keep him out of the city. The rest is of less importance, but it has been made clear to me that he must not reach Boston.”

“Made clear?” the big man repeated. “Ya mean by Seph--?”

“Shh!” the spectacled man said sharply. “Do not say anything more.”

“Bu--”

“Nothing more. It was made clear to me. You know by who. We need not speak of it further.”

The big man grunted and asked, “All righ’ then. An’ how’re we supposed t’ keep him away?”

“That is my concern. You have other responsibilities, which I have already explained to you. See to them, and we will not have any surprises, even if the rest does

not go as it is supposed to.”

“You all right?”

Ethan looked over at Diver, who was eyeing him with concern. He held up a hand and shook his head.

“How much we gettin’ fer all o’ this anyways?” the big man asked.

“Ethan--”

“Quiet, Diver!” he whispered harshly. “I’m listening.”

“. . . pounds, divided the usual way.”

“Aye, well tha’ way still ain’ right. Ya said las’ time it’d be changin’. ‘Member?”

“Listening to what?” Diver asked, clearly wounded by Ethan’s tone.

Ethan glared at him.

“. . . will change. Perhaps this time. But first we have to complete the task. After that we can talk about a new division of payment.”

The big man grunted again, sounding unhappy.

After a brief silence from the stranger and his friend, Ethan heard a tankard put down on the table and the scrape of a chair on the tavern’s wooden floor.

“I am leaving now,” the spectacled man said. “I would suggest you leave this place, as well. I am not sure it is as safe as we assumed.”

“Wha’s tha’ mean?”

“Nothing,” the stranger said quietly.

Ethan saw him emerge from their corner of the tavern and make his way to the door. He watched from the corner of his eye as once again the man surveyed the room,

perhaps hoping that Ethan would reveal himself with another spell. Reaching the door he glanced back one last time, his spectacles flashing in the lamplight. Then he slipped out into the night. Shortly after, the big man left as well, lumbering to the door without so much as a backward glance.

Still Ethan didn't release the spell, for fear that the stranger lurked outside the Dowser, waiting for him to do just that.

But he looked at Diver again. "Sorry about that," he said. "I'd cast a spell and was listening to their conversation."

"Whose conversation?" Diver demanded, his patience obviously spent.

"I didn't catch either of their names. I told you, I saw one of them with Tanner; the other I had never seen before. But he started to say something about Sephira. I'm sure of it. The other man cut him off before he could say more."

"What were they talking about?"

Ethan repeated their cryptic references to the ship.

"Do you think any of this is important?"

"I don't know," Ethan admitted. "But there was something else about the one who knows Tanner: He felt my conjuring."

Diver's brow furrowed. "You think he--" He stopped, his mouth dropping open and his eyes going wide. "You mean," he whispered, "you think he's a speller, too?"

"Aye. And if he is -- and if he's working on something with Sephira -- then this could be very important."

"So what do we do?"

Ethan nearly laughed; for better or worse it seemed he had a partner. “You’re working the wharfs tomorrow, right?”

“Aye, but I can skip it if you need me to.”

“No, I need you there.” Diver’s face fell, but Ethan pressed on. “Where will you be?”

“Thornton’s Shipyard,” Diver said, his voice flat. “Or maybe Greenough’s.”

“Good. In that case you can be responsible for watching the North End wharves for Sephira or this friend of hers.”

“How can I watch for him? You didn’t even let me look at him!”

Ethan described the man and his companion. “Don’t say anything to them. Don’t even go near them. Just watch what they do and report back to me.”

Diver frowned, clearly disappointed by his instructions. “All right. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll be watching the wharves in the South End and Cornhill.” He couldn’t possibly watch all the wharves, of course. Boston’s waterfront was as active as any in New England and was nearly a match for those in New York and Philadelphia, even with the hard times that had befallen the city in recent years. But he hoped that if he could stay near Long Wharf, the busiest in the city, he might learn something of value.

“Are you sure there isn’t something else you want me to do?” Diver asked.

“Maybe follow Spectacles, or his big friend?”

“I’m sure,” Ethan told him.

“Right.” Diver drank the rest of his ale and stood. “Best be heading off then. I

have an exciting day at the wharf ahead of me.”

“Sleep well, my friend,” Ethan said.

Diver nodded, but lingered by the table. “I really am sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Ethan smiled. “I know.”

Diver left the tavern, raising a hand in farewell as he passed Kelf. Not long after, Kannice came to Ethan’s table, as he had known she would.

She sat and took his hand. “Do you want to tell me what happened?” she asked.

Ethan chuckled. “Diver would prefer that I didn’t.”

“I thought as much. That’s why I asked you.”

“I won’t bother you with the details, but the upshot is that Sephira learned of what I was doing from a girl Diver knows, and it cost us a few pounds.” He shrugged.

“There’s nothing to be done about it now.”

“She could have killed you.”

“Sephira has had ample opportunity to kill me, if that’s what she wants,” he said. But Kannice was right. It could have been far worse, and it nearly was for Tanner. He wondered if he had been too quick to let Diver work with him again.

“You know what I mean,” Kannice said. “I understand that he’s your friend, but you’re best off leaving him to the wharfs and doing your thieftaking on your own.”

Sound advice. He would have been wise to take it.

“You’re already letting him help you with something else, aren’t you?”

She knew him as well as she did the wood grain of her tavern’s bar, and she was

as smart as anyone he had ever known. He would have been well-served to have her work with him, but she was too clever for that.

“It’s not a job,” Ethan said, an admission in the words. “I saw something tonight, and I just want to make sure that Sephira isn’t causing more trouble.”

She glared at him, lamp light shining in her bright blue eyes. “And you thought it would be a good idea to let Derrey tag along as you meddle in Sephira Pryce’s affairs.”

Put like that, it sounded pretty foolish.

“Honestly, Ethan, sometimes I think his stupidity rubs off on you, like it’s contagious or something.”

She shook her head, got up, and started toward the bar. Halfway there, she stopped, heaved a sigh, and walked back to his table. Halting in front of him, she offered a contrite smile. “I didn’t mean for that to come out the way it did. I just remember what’s happened in the past when you’ve crossed her.”

He remembered, too. Over the years, Sephira’s men had beaten him to a bloody mess, stolen his money, and nearly killed him more times than he could count. “I’m not going out of my way to start a new fight with Sephira Pryce. I promise. But one of the men I saw in here tonight is a conjurer, and I think I overheard him and his friend talking about Sephira. I don’t like the idea of her having access to spells.”

“I can see that.” She tilted her head to the side, regarding him coyly. “You staying tonight?”

“I’d like to, if you don’t mind having a man as foolish as me in your bed.”

She grinned and draped the towel she was carrying over her shoulder. “It’s never

bothered me before,” she said, and walked away.

Chapter 3

Strange, dark dreams troubled his sleep. At first he was chasing Tanner through the narrow byways of the South End, which were shrouded in fog. Soon though, he was the one being pursued. He couldn't see who followed him, but he knew it had to be Sephira and her men, and he knew as well that they were intent on killing him.

Before long, though, he had stopped running. The spectacled man stood before him, a knife in his hand, blood on his forearm, and the words of a spell on his lips. Ethan grabbed for his own blade and fumbled with his sleeve, but he knew it would be too late.

Which may have been why he felt so disoriented when he awoke suddenly to what felt like a mighty wave of conjuring power. It seemed to rise from the earth itself, like the deep rumble of thunder after a blinding flash of lightning. The entire building trembled with it. Or did it? At first Ethan thought he was dreaming, and even after he opened his eyes to the faint morning light seeping into Kannice's bedroom around the edges of the shuttered window, he couldn't tell if what he had felt was real or imagined. His heart labored in his chest, and he took several long breaths, trying to calm himself.

Kannice stirred beside him. "Whassamatter?" she asked in a muffled, sleepy voice.

Ethan kissed her bare shoulder. "Nothing. Go back to sleep."

But he was already wide awake. He lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling, his body tensed as he waited for another pulse of power. None came, and as the minutes

passed he began to doubt that he had actually felt the first one. It would have taken a powerful conjurer to cast such a deep spell, and there simply weren't that many in Boston. At least, not among the people he knew.

His thoughts turned once more to the stranger he had seen downstairs in the Dowser the night before. Clearly this man had access to some sort of power Ethan possessed -- enough at least to sense spells cast by others. But Ethan had no reason to think that this man was powerful or skilled enough to cast a spell as strong as the one he had just felt. Such a conjurer would have known what kind of casting Ethan had used the night before, and would have left the tavern rather than continue a conversation he obviously didn't want others to hear. A speller with such abilities might even have determined exactly who in the tavern had cast the listening spell.

But if the spectacled man hadn't cast the spell this morning, who had? Tarijanna Windcatcher, a self-described "marriage smith," was a powerful speller and made no effort to hide the fact that she conjured. But Janna did most of her conjuring at night; the one time Ethan went by her place before midmorning, he woke her with his knocking. Janna had been none too pleased.

Gavin Black, an old conjurer who lived in the New Lanes, gave up spells long ago, or so he claimed. From what he had told Ethan, it seemed he had done most of his conjuring as a younger man while sailing on merchant ships and captaining his own vessel. But he had long since made his fortune, and though Ethan had spoken to him about conjuring, he had never actually seen the man cast a spell.

The other conjurers he knew of in Boston weren't skilled enough to work such

powerful castings.

If the spell had been real.

Ethan closed his eyes again, trying to remember exactly what he felt in the instant before he woke. At first all that came to him was the physical sensation, the feeling that the air around him, the bed beneath him, the walls of the room, were all reverberating with a single tone, as if God himself had struck some enormous bell. But sifting through his memory of those first few sensations, he realized that he had awakened feeling vaguely uneasy, though because of his dreams or something inherently dark in the casting, he couldn't say.

His pulse had slowed, but still Ethan knew that he wouldn't get back to sleep. He swung himself out of bed and began to pull on his clothes.

"Where are you going?" Kannice asked lazily. She smiled up at him. "It's early still."

"I can't sleep."

"I wasn't suggesting sleep."

He sat on the bed beside her. "I'm not sure I'm in the mood for that, either."

Her expression grew serious. "What's the matter?"

"I thought I felt something. A spell. That's what woke me."

"Nearby?"

He shook his head. "No. Maybe. It was so powerful it was hard to tell. Somewhere here in Boston, but I can't be sure of much beyond that. The truth is, I'm not even sure it was real."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"I might have dreamt it. It felt real enough, but I can't think of anyone in this city with the strength or skill needed to cast such a spell."

"You said last night that there was a man in the tavern. A conjurer."

"I don't think it was him," Ethan said. He stood again and reached for his shirt. "But I should go. Something about this isn't right." He wanted to know more about the spectacled man, and eventually he would speak with Janna. She might not have been responsible for the spell that woke him, but at least she would be able to tell him whether or not he had imagined it.

He finished dressing and leaned over to kiss her.

"A spell as big as what you felt," she whispered. "Could you have cast it?"

Ethan hesitated, nodded. "Aye. But only by taking a life."

She didn't blanch; her eyes didn't widen. She merely said, "Watch yourself," and reached up to touch his cheek.

He took her hand briefly. "Always."

He left her room, descended the stairs, and walked out of the Dowser into the street. The sun still hung low in the east, but the sky above was cloudless and a deep shade of azure. Vapor from his breath billowed into the morning air and was swept away by a cool breeze. A perfect autumn morning. No doubt October would bring gray skies and cold rains. But for today, at least, September maintained its gentle hold on the province.

Ethan set out toward Cornhill and the South End, where he leased a room from

Henry Dall, a cooper. He had food there and he liked to check in with Henry periodically, just to let the old man know that he was well. Henry might have been his landlord, but he treated Ethan as he would a son. Knowing that Ethan was a thieftaker, he worried when he didn't hear from him for more than a day or two.

As Ethan walked toward his home, he considered again Kannice's question and his answer to it.

The spells cast by conjurers fell into three broad categories. The first, elemental spells, were by far the simplest, and also the least powerful. Using one of the basic elements -- air, water, earth, or fire -- for his spells, a conjurer could summon phantom sounds or visual illusions to confuse a foe or deceive the unsuspecting. When Ethan's mother first began to teach him and his sisters how to conjure, these were the spells she showed them.

The second group of spells were called living spells. These were more potent and more difficult to cast. A living spell drew its power from some part of a living thing: blood or flesh, hair or feathers, grass, leaves or tree bark. Such spellmaking went far beyond mere illusion. Using living spells, a conjurer could heal with blood, as Ethan had the night before, or he could kill with it. A powerful conjurer might raise a wind or a storm; he might conjure fire or draw water from the earth.

And yet, as powerful as these spells could be, they were nothing compared to killing spells. These conjurings required the taking of a life, and there were almost no limits to what they could do. A conjurer who was willing to kill could reduce Boston to a pile of rubble or boil away the waters of Boston Harbor. He could rob others of their free

will and force them to do his bidding, no matter how heinous.

In all his years, Ethan had cast only one killing spell, and though he'd had little choice at the time, he was still haunted by the memory. But he had encountered conjurers who had no qualms about spending lives to wield their power. The spell he had felt this morning was almost certainly a killing spell. That would explain not only the potency of the casting, but also the unsettled feeling it had given him.

And once more, a voice in his head echoed, If it was real.

Breakfast could wait, and so could Henry. He needed to know more about this spell.

Under most circumstances he never would have gone to Tarijanna so early in the morning. On the best of days she was difficult, even ill-tempered. She had few friends and though she tolerated Ethan because he was a speller and because they shared a deep and abiding hatred of Sephira Pryce, she probably didn't like him any more than she did anyone else. But he had to know if he had dreamt that spell or truly felt it.

The walk to Janna's home took Ethan past the old Granary Burying Ground and King's Chapel, where his friend Trevor Pell served as a minister under the authority of the rector, the Reverend Henry Caner. Once beyond the chapel, Ethan cut south to Newbury Street, where homes and shops gave way to open pastures and wooded country estates. Sugar maples and white-barked birch trees lined the road and grew in clusters along the edges of fields and grazing tracts, their leaves, shading toward orange and bright yellow, rustling in the wind.

Tarijanna lived at the southern edge of Boston, near the town gate, on a narrow

strip of land known as the Neck. She owned a run-down tavern called the Fat Spider, and lived in a small room on the second floor of the building. Most of the those who frequented the Spider were conjurers themselves or people who came to Janna seeking her services as a spellmaker. She served food and drink in her tavern, just like the proprietor of any other public house. But she also sold herbs and oils, ancient texts and talismans. And she peddled her services as a conjurer. She specialized in love spells, which she used to find love matches for her clients. The sign outside her tavern read “T. Windcatcher, Marriage Smith. Love is magick.” It might as well have said, “A speller lives here!”

Spellers were feared, even hated. Most people mistakenly equated conjuring with witchcraft, and though it had been nearly a century since witch trials led to the execution of twenty men and women in nearby Salem, Massachusetts, suspected witches were still put to death throughout the province. Janna didn't seem to care.

Reaching the Fat Spider, Ethan knocked on the tavern door, expecting that he would have to rap on the gray, weathered wood for several minutes before hearing any response. He was wrong.

At the first knock, he heard a strong voice call out “It's unlocked!”

Ethan pushed the door open and stepped into the dark tavern. As always, the air within smelled strongly of cinnamon, clove, roasting meat, and ale. Janna sat in a low chair by the fire, a cup in her hand, filled no doubt with watered Madeira wine.

Janna hailed from one of the Caribbean islands, though because she was orphaned at sea as a young girl, she didn't know which one. She also didn't know her

exact age, or her family name -- she chose Windcatcher because she liked the sound of it.

Her skin was a rich nut brown, and her hair, which she wore shorn nearly to her scalp, was as white as bone. But though her thin, wrinkled face made her appear ancient, her dark eyes were as bright and alert as those of a child. If she had asked Ethan how old he thought she was, he wouldn't have known what to say.

"Kaille," she said upon seeing him, her mouth turned down in a scowl. "I shoulda known it was you. First person t' come through that door, and you ain't gonna spend one pence. You like a bad omen comin' so early."

She said much the same thing whenever he came to her tavern. In fairness, she had a point. He rarely bought anything from her; usually he sought her counsel when he had questions about spells, because no one in the city knew more about conjuring than she did. The truth was, Ethan might well have been as close a friend as Janna had in Boston. He chose to believe that she greeted him this way because she liked him. Others she would have simply ignored.

"Nice to see you, too, Janna."

The scowl deepened. "What d'you want, anyway?"

He crossed to where she sat and pulled up a chair next to hers. The fire in her hearth threw off a lot of heat, but still she had a shawl wrapped tightly around her bony shoulders and a threadbare woolen blanket covering her legs. She often complained of the cold, even on the mildest days of spring and fall. For all the years she had lived in the city, it seemed to Ethan that she had never adjusted to leaving the islands.

“You’re up early today,” he said. “Earlier than usual.”

She shrugged, her gaze sliding away. “Why would you care ‘bout when I sleep an’ when I don’t?”

“You felt it too, didn’t you?”

“I don’ know what you’re talkin’ about.”

“Look me in the eye, Janna.”

Reluctantly, she faced him again.

“Did you feel something this morning?” he asked, holding her gaze. “Did you feel a pulse of power? It came just after dawn, and it would have been strong enough to make it feel like the Spider was going to come down on top of you.”

Janna glared back at him. “Yeah,” she said at last. “I felt it.”

Ethan sat back in his chair, feeling both relieved and alarmed. He hadn’t imagined it. But then who could have cast such a spell?

“You weren’t certain,” Janna said.

He shook his head. “It woke me from a dream, and I didn’t know if it was real or not.”

She gave a low chuckle. “Oh, it was real. Like you said, I thought this old buildin’ was gonna crumble it started shakin’ so.”

“Do you know what kind of spell it was?” Ethan asked.

“No,” Janna said. “But it was dark, and strong as can be. If I had t’ guess, I’d say it was a killin’ spell. But I couldn’ tell what th’ magick was supposed t’ do.”

“Neither could I. Do you know where it came from?”

“Somewhere in th’ city. But you knew that.”

“There aren’t too many of us who can conjure like that,” Ethan said.

She shook her head. “You, me, Ole Black. We’re the only ones I can think of.” She eyed him slyly. “To be honest, Kaille, I figured it was you.”

“It wasn’t. And I don’t think it was Gavin, either.” He raised his eyebrows. “I assume it wasn’t you.”

“Woke me from a deep sleep,” she said.

“So I figured, seeing as you’re awake before noon.” He smiled; she frowned. “Is there anyone new in town, Janna? Anyone who could cast a spell like this?”

“No one I can think of.”

He had expected her to say as much. “All right,” he said, standing. “My thanks.” He crossed back to the tavern door and pulled it open. “If you hear anything about a new speller in Boston, someone capable of this kind of conjuring, you’ll let me know, right?”

“There any gold in it?”

“I’m not working for anyone. I’m doing this for me.”

“Yeah,” she said, the scowl returning. “I thought so.”

He smiled, stepped out onto the street, and started to pull the door closed.

“Kaille.”

He poked his head back in the tavern.

“You were the first person I thought of; other minds might work the same way. You watch yourself.”

Would she have given such a warning to someone she didn’t like, at least a little?

“I will. Again, thank you, Janna.”

Leaving the Fat Spider, Ethan followed Orange Street back north as far as Essex Street, and turned east toward the harbor, making his way past the wharves and stillhouses west of Windmill Point. The sun was higher overhead, warming the air a little, but not enough to drive off the autumn chill. Hundreds of gulls circled over the shoreline, ghostly white against the deep blue sky, their cries echoing through the city streets. A line of cormorants, black as pitch against the aqua waters, glided just above the swells.

Ethan could see a few merchant ships in the harbor. Two or three white sails billowed in the distance, and several ships closer to port were already on sweeps. But the fourteen British naval vessels positioned near Castle William, the fortification on Castle Island at the south end of the harbor, dominated the waterways. Even at a distance, Ethan could see red uniformed soldiers on their decks, and the black iron mouths of the ships' cannons gaping in the gun ports. Merchant ships piloted by captains less bold than those who had passed the naval vessels on their way to port, might already have sailed to Newport or one of the smaller ports in Newbury or Salem. If the Crown's show of force was intended to choke off the flow of commerce into the city, it appeared to be having the desired effect.

Ethan considered himself a loyalist. He had little patience with those who rioted in the streets, destroying property as a sign of their dissatisfaction with British Colonial rule. Boston had seen too much of this in recent years. Three summers before, when Parliament first announced its intent to impose a stamp duty on all official documents, a

mob ransacked the residence of Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson, as well as the houses of several other Crown officials. And this past summer, when customs officers seized a ship belonging to John Hancock and accused the merchant of smuggling, agitators in the city again took to the streets, this time actually threatening physical violence against Crown representatives.

Yet he knew as well that the king's men were far from blameless. The seizure of Hancock's ship had been a vast overreaction to the merchant's failure to submit proper papers for a shipment of Madeira wine, and it had given Samuel Adams and his mischief-makers just the excuse they needed to riot. Throughout the summer, Governor Bernard had threatened -- unnecessarily, to Ethan's mind -- to post British army troops throughout the city, and as tension between loyalists and some of Boston's more outspoken Whigs rose, and rumors of the impending occupation spread, prominent men such as James Otis and Samuel Adams spoke with ever-increasing frequency of a looming confrontation.

As a loyal subject of His Majesty King George the Third, Ethan never had cause to fear any British soldier, at least not before this summer and fall. He had served in the British Navy, fought in the Crimean War. He had more in common with the men on those ships than he did with the Adamases, Warrens, and Otises of the world. But he knew better than to think that the hundreds of soldiers waiting out on the harbor had come merely as a demonstration of the Crown's resolve. Boston was on the verge of becoming an occupied city, and Ethan couldn't help thinking that the landing of regulars at Boston's waterfront would lead to problems far worse than those that had brought

loyalists and Whigs to this point.

Nevertheless, the city bustled as it would on any day other than the Sabbath. Though it was early still, both Essex Street and Purchase Street, which followed the South End shoreline northward toward the South Battery, were choked with people and carriages. Wharfmen and sailors made their way from warehouse to warehouse looking for a day's wage. Merchants in silk suits and peddlers in rags jostled one another, trying to find bargains before off-loaded goods reached the markets of Faneuil Hall.

Ethan scanned faces as he shouldered his way past people on the street, but he saw neither the spectacled man nor his brawny friend. To his relief, he also saw no sign of Sephira or her toughs.

He limped on, his bad leg beginning to grow weary and sore. He couldn't keep himself from glancing repeatedly at the warships. The lead ship appeared to be a fifth rate frigate, probably carrying forty-four guns. A smaller frigate of perhaps thirty guns, lay to the north of her. He saw as well a post-ship, and several sloops-of-war and armed schooners. It wasn't a fleet that would have struck fear in the hearts of French naval captains, but it was more than enough to pacify this city and its harbor. All the ships had their sails down; no doubt their captains were awaiting orders. With just a glance Ethan counted hundreds of men on the various vessels. And rumor had it that another wave of ships and soldiers was on its way to the city from Halifax. The occupation would begin soon enough, and it would be massive.

As he neared Long Wharf, which jutted out into the waters of the Harbor more than a third of a mile, Ethan saw a group of men standing on the wharf, speaking among

themselves, gesturing animatedly. All of them were well-dressed in matching coats, breeches and waistcoats -- ditto suits, as they were known. Several of them wore tricorne hats and all wore powdered wigs. These were men of means. Still, Ethan might not have taken note of them had he not spotted a familiar face in their midst.

Geoffrey Brower, the husband of his sister, Bett, and to hear her speak of him, a customs commissioner of some importance, stood among the men. He was taller and leaner than the others, with a high forehead and a supercilious expression on his lean face. Ethan didn't recognize any of Geoffrey's companions, but given how similarly all of them were dressed, he assumed that they were customs men as well. He stopped where he was and watched them.

As they spoke, the men repeatedly looked out toward the British fleet, particularly those ships at its north end. Looking that way himself, Ethan noticed that a pinnace holding several British regulars in their bright red coats and white breeches, was approaching one of the ships, a sloop-of-war. The sloop had its sails struck, as did the other vessels, but Ethan could see no one on its decks. Not a soul.

Several more regulars in another rowboat made their way toward the sloop from the northern end of the island. And not long after, a second pinnace from one of the larger ships closest to the city's waterfront approached Long Wharf and the dock near where Geoffrey and his colleagues stood. The boat drew alongside the pier and two of the soldiers on board held her steady while Geoffrey and two other men stepped into the vessel. Once the commissioners were settled, the men began to row the boat out into the harbor. Within a few minutes it became clear to Ethan that they too were headed toward

the sloop.

Something had happened to the warship, something serious enough to worry leaders of the fleet as well as Crown officials here in the city. Still watching the rowboats, and glancing occasionally toward the sloop-of-war, Ethan started toward the wharf. Three of Geoffrey's friends had remained behind, and he considered casting another concealment spell, like the one he had used the night before to follow Tanner, so that he could eavesdrop on their conversation.

He reached for his blade, only pausing long enough to look around and make certain he wasn't being watched.

His caution might have saved his life.

Perhaps twenty yards ahead of him, partially hidden in a narrow alley, stood none other than the spectacled man and his companion. They hadn't yet noticed Ethan, although they would have had he spoken his spell. They were gazing out over the harbor, as he had been. Spectacles held a brass spyglass that he raised now to his eye. It seemed to Ethan that he had it trained on the sloop.

Rather than halt again and thus draw attention to himself, Ethan kept his head down and walked past the men. But his pulse raced. Whatever had happened to the British sloop-of-war had drawn the attention of Sephira's conjurer friend.

Or perhaps the man had done something to the ship. Something that demanded a spell powerful enough to wake all of Boston's conjurers from their early morning slumber.