

TIME'S DEMON, Book II of the Islevale Cycle

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Chapter 1

12th day of Sipar's Ascent, Year 615

His memories of the first day were blurred by tears, distorted by fatigue, darkened by fear and homesickness and the surety that he would never belong.

He was tall for his age, gangly, awkward, and yet everything he saw – the gates through which he passed, the refectory in which he first encountered others of his kind, the keep in which he would sleep for years to come – made him feel small, insignificant. He was also old, at least for a fingerling, as new novitiates were called. His father, dispassionate to the last, assured him that this would make his transition easier. One final lie.

That first night, after the evening meal, which Cresten barely touched, an older boy confronted him in the middle courtyard. The boy was two hands taller, and broader as well. A dozen other novitiates stood with him, leering, predatory eyes glinting with torch fire.

“New boy. Big baby. You get lost on the way here? You wander in circles for five years?”

Cresten toed the grass. “We didn’t know—”

“What’s that? I can’t hear you.”

He looked up. “We didn’t know I was a Spanner,” he said in a raised voice. “Not until

recently.”

“You shouting at me? That what you’re doing?”

“You said you couldn’t hear–”

The boy shoved him with both hands. Cresten stumbled back a step, and fell onto his bottom. The others laughed. The boy stared, daring him to get up. He did.

“You need to learn manners, fingerling.”

He knew better than to run or cry for help. Either would only delay the inevitable.

The only way past is through, his father often said. Wisdom he offered in place of affection. Cresten had always hated his aphorisms. But he heard this one in his father’s voice, and knew it for truth.

“Maybe. There anyone here smart enough to teach them to me?”

That was all it took. The boy lashed out with a closed fist, his blow catching Cresten square in the face. Cresten staggered, fell again, tasting blood, feeling it flow from his nose. His eyes stung and he willed himself not to cry.

The boy loomed over him, goaded by the cheers of his friends. He kicked Cresten in the side. Cresten gasped, retched. This time he couldn’t keep tears from falling.

“What’s all this?”

A man strode toward them, bald pate shining in the torchlight, a single, thin plait of dark hair swinging with every step. He shouldered his way through the circle of novitiates, and planted himself in front of Cresten and the older boy.

“I asked a question, Mister Tache,” the man said. A burr shaded his words. “What are you up to?” Before the boy could answer, the man – one of the palace masters, no doubt – turned to

Cresten. “You’re new,” he said. “And not having a grand time of it, are you?”

He extended a hand. Cresten gripped it and allowed the man to pull him up.

“What’s your name?”

“Cresten Padkar, sir.”

“You arrive today?”

“Yes, sir. A bell or two past midday.”

“I see. How’d you come to be bloodied so?”

Tache eyed him, wary and tense.

The next several years of Cresten’s life would be determined by how he answered. He could make himself an outcast. Or he could make himself a perpetual victim. In the end, he chose a third path. His father would have chided him for giving in to his emotions, his temper, his need for vengeance. But four days ago his father had walked him to the dock in Qesle and put him on a merchant ship with a change of clothes, a few pieces of silver, and a token from the village warden that marked him as a candidate for entry to the palace.

“If you are found wanting, you will find work making *gaaz*,” his father had said. “It will not be a bad life either way. And someday perhaps, if the Two see fit, they will send you back to us.” That was all.

His father could rot for all he cared.

“I’ve missed a lot,” Cresten said, “coming so late to the palace. Mister Tache was teaching me some combat moves. I guess I’m a slow learner.”

The master narrowed his eyes, slanted a look at Tache. “A slow learner,” he repeated.

“Yes, sir.”

A faint smile touched his lips. "Very well. It's time the rest of you were off to the keeps. It's late to be... training. Welcome, Mister Padkar. I'm the weapons master, Grenley Albon. I suppose I'll see you in the morning and we can get to work speeding up your reflexes, if not your capacity for learning."

Cresten's cheeks flushed hot. "Yes, sir."

Albon nodded to the others and walked off, leaving Cresten with Tache and his friends.

Tache watched the master walk away before facing Cresten, grudging respect in his expression.

"That was—"

Cresten had already coiled himself to strike, and didn't let him say more. He threw the punch as hard as he could, his fist cracking Tache in the jaw. The boy went down in a heap.

Others gaped at him. Tache scrambled to his feet and raised his fists, murder in his eyes. Blood seeped from a cut at the corner of his mouth.

"You're a corpse!"

"That's enough."

Tache faltered and glanced in the direction from which the voice had come.

Another novice stepped into the circle: a girl, older than Tache, plain-looking. She had straight bronze hair and a wide mouth. She was no taller than Tache, but she was solid, like an Aiyanthan warship, and there was a wildness in her pale eyes that reminded Cresten of the feral cats that prowled Qesle's waterfront.

Tache had gone still, but his fisted hand remained poised. He eyed the girl, appearing unnerved by her arrival.

“Did you see what he did to me?” he asked. “I should kill him.”

“I saw,” the girl said. “Saw what you did to him, too. It’s over. You’re even.”

“That’s not—”

“It’s over,” she said again, enunciating the words. “He didn’t spill to Albon. Ask me, and I’d say you owe him.”

The obvious response hung in the air, waiting to be given voice. No one *had* asked her. Cresten took it as a measure of how much Tache feared the girl – how much they all did – that the words remained unspoken. The girl smirked.

“Get going,” she said. “All of you. Children shouldn’t be out of bed so late.”

Tache and the others stared at her. None of them argued, but neither did they flee. The girl returned Tache’s gaze and raised an eyebrow, no more.

“Fine,” he said, sounding disgusted. “We’re done here.” He regarded the girl again, flicked a look in Cresten’s direction, and stalked away. His friends followed, whispering among themselves. Several glanced back at the girl, but as many spared a peek at Cresten as well. One way or another, they’d be talking about him.

He meant to thank the girl once they were alone, but before he could, she said, “You need a special escort? Someone to tuck you in?”

Cresten rounded on her. She had already started away.

He hurried after her. “Wait! Who are you?”

She didn’t slow. “Someone who’s too busy to wet-nurse slack-witted fingerlings.”

The words stung, slowing him.

“At least tell me your name,” he said, resuming his pursuit.

She whirled. Cresten startled to a halt.

“Why would you hit him? You’d won already. You didn’t dob him out to Albon. They were ready to accept you. And then you ruined it all. You haven’t the brains of a stick.”

She walked on.

“If I hadn’t hit him,” he called after her, “someone else would have figured they could stomp on me any time they wanted, and they wouldn’t even get in trouble. ”

The girl halted again, her back to him.

“It wasn’t enough to get away,” he went on. “I had to make a point.”

She wheeled, considered him with her head canted, and crossed back to where he waited.

“That’s not the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.” She eyed him a moment longer. “Wink.”

Cresten frowned, but tried to blink his right eye.

The girl laughed. “You really are a fool, aren’t you? That wasn’t a command. It’s my name. Wink. Short for Wenikai.”

Cresten blushed, but smiled. “I’m not sure how I was supposed to know that.”

She shrugged, the smile still on her lips. When she grinned, she was pretty. He was smart enough not to say so.

“Is Wenikai your family name or your given name?”

“It’s hard to tell, isn’t it?”

After a brief silence, he realized this was the only answer she intended to give. She turned to head back to the middle keeps, gesturing for him to follow.

“What’s yours?”

“Cresten Padkar.”

They walked in silence for a few strides.

“You know where the boy’s keep is, right?”

He pointed.

“Good. You’re not to follow me around like a puppy. I don’t need friends and I’m not interested in mindless followers, like those idiots with Tache. I helped you, and you’re grateful. You admire me, think I might be the answer to all the doubts and fears that have been niggling since you crossed through the gates. I’m not. I’m the best Spanner in the palace, and also the best at combat – fists, blades, and pistols. You, on the other hand, are lint. You’re dust. You’re the stuff I scrape off my boot before stepping inside. Got it?”

Harsh as the words were, Wink’s tone remained mild.

“I understand.”

“Say it back to me. ‘I’m lint.’”

“No.”

She halted, and grabbed his shoulder, stopping him, too.

“You’re skin and bones, and about the height of a shit-beetle. I could crush you with my toe.” She leaned in, looming over him. “Plus, I saved you from a beating. And you’re telling me no?”

Cresten still ached from his fight with Tache, and he was certain Wink could do worse. He didn’t care. His mother and father had given him precious little in his few years, but they had instilled in him a sense of pride. Not with praise, the Two knew, nor with kindness. Like Herjean pox, their own had been infectious. He couldn’t help but contract it as well.

“You’re too busy to be my friend,” he said. “I get that. But I’m not lint. If you want to hit

me for saying so, go ahead. That won't change my mind."

Wink straightened, appraised him anew. "You come from money?"

Cresten dropped his gaze.

"Right, I thought so."

"We weren't rich," he said. "Just..."

"Just not poor, like the rest of us."

"Don't tell anyone. Please."

"You keep acting like a rich man's son, I won't have to. They'll beat you to a bloody mess so fast, you won't be able to leave this palace soon enough."

He scowled to hide his fear. Pride again. "What am I supposed to do? Call myself lint and let everyone pound on me?"

"If that's what it takes."

Tears welled. He swiped at his eyes with a vicious hand.

"Why are you here, anyway?" she asked, acting like she hadn't noticed. He almost thanked her. "Your parents shouldn't need the gold."

There are other kinds of poverty. "There are a lot of us," he said, keeping the other thought to himself. "I have five brothers and a sister, all older. I was... They didn't need me." *They didn't want me.* "And they couldn't afford to keep me. Even with their money."

"Well, then you're not that different from the rest of us, are you?"

They shared wan smiles.

"Just... don't be so damn sure of yourself all the time."

"You won't tell?"

“And let them know I took time out of my busy evening to talk to you? ‘Course not.” She cushioned this with another grin. “Go on. Tache bothers you again, tell him I’m watching. Not for you, but as payback. He’ll understand.”

Payback for what, he wanted to know. He thought better of asking. He lifted his hand in a small gesture, something between acknowledgment and a wave, and started toward the boy’s dormitory.

“Hey, shit-beetle.”

He gave an inward groan, knowing that name would stick. Still, he faced her again.

“That was a good punch. Few more like that, and it might not matter who your father is.”

Chapter 2

13th day of Sipar's Ascent, Year 615

Palace stewards had set his bed just inside the door of the chamber shared by the younger boys. It was covered by the thinnest blanket, the dingiest linens, the flattest pillow. He assumed the other boys had picked over his bedding like vultures. He didn't care.

None of the boys said a word to him, and he made no effort to speak with them. He undressed, slipped into bed, and curled into a tight ball, his face to the wall.

He shed his tears silently, holding himself still against sobs that should have wracked his body. Eventually he fell into a dreamless slumber that carried him to morning.

Cresten woke to the pealing of bells in the tower overhead. The boys rose, straightened their bedding, donned dark trousers and pale tunics, and hustled from the dormitory to the refectory. Cresten followed their every example. His side hurt from Tache's kick, but he kept that to himself.

He spotted the older boy in the courtyard, sporting a dark bruise on his swollen jaw. Cresten probably looked worse. The skin on his cheek was tender and tight. Still he took some satisfaction in the wound he had dealt. Tache made a show of ignoring him, which pleased him that much more. Remembering Wink's warning, he masked his enjoyment.

Their breakfast was ample, if simple. After, his group of novitiates began their lessons with history. Cresten sat in the back of the room, absorbing every word. The class was studying Oaqamaran history, and Cresten had missed all that came before the Resurgence, the subject of

this day's lecture. He was fascinated nevertheless. Other boys and girls asked questions, phrasing them with a precocious eloquence that seemed common here. Cresten had questions as well, but held his tongue. He suspected Wink would approve.

Protocol, finance, and science proved no less stimulating than history. Only when he reached Master Albon's training grounds, though, did he truly begin to understand the gift his parents had given him. Inadvertently or not, they had sent him to the place where he most belonged.

Albon had them work with wooden blades. He paired Cresten with a boy named Vahn Marcoji. Vahn was only nine, like Cresten, but he had been in the palace for several years, training with the others. It showed. He was better than Cresten at everything. He was faster, his footwork more precise, his strokes stronger.

They didn't speak much as they sparred. Beyond exchanging names and a smattering of details they had little to say. Vahn was from Onyi, the oldest of three boys, born of parents who made *gaaz*, like everyone else in their village. That was the extent of what they shared. Albon hovered nearby, assessing Cresten's skills, occasionally offering words of advice.

"Keep your knees bent; as soon as you lock them, you've lost." "You're lunging. Center your weight over your feet. Always fight from a solid foundation." "Less wrist; more arm. When you graduate to steel, you'll need the power."

With each interruption, Vahn waited for the master to make his point, and then resumed his attacks. He betrayed no impatience with Cresten's mistakes.

Too soon, the bell tolled, bringing an end to their training. Cresten could have gone on for another bell. Following the others, he set his sword on the rack, his tunic damp with sweat

despite the cold wind. He hoped the master would say something about his work, perhaps praise his progress. When he racked his weapon, though, Albon didn't nod or offer a word of encouragement.

Vahn did. "That was good for your first time," he said, falling in step beside him. He was shorter than Cresten, better proportioned. His skin was the color of strong tea, his features soft and delicate.

"So I wasn't that bad?" he said.

"Oh, you were awful. But considering you'd never sparred before, it could have been worse."

Cresten deflated. "Oh. All right."

"You'll be fine. We can practice in our free time. That's the only good part of fighting with wood instead of steel. We don't need permission to train."

"Thanks."

They walked some distance without speaking. Cresten gathered they were headed back to the refectory. Good thing: He was famished.

"You're the one who bloodied Jaer, aren't you?"

"Jaer?"

"Tache."

"Oh. Yes, that was me. Is he a friend?"

Vahn laughed, high-pitched and abrupt. "Not at all. No, I was going to thank you." He studied Cresten's bruise. "He give you that?"

"And more."

“Good thing you hit him, then.”

Cresten grinned, winced at the soreness in his jaw.

“Heard Wink took an interest in you. All in your first day?”

“I didn’t ask for any of it.”

“I wouldn’t think so. Still, that could have been worse, too. People are talking about the fingerling who bloodied Tache, and with Wink telling everyone she doesn’t want you touched, you don’t have to worry about him coming back at you.”

Cresten stopped. “She’s telling people that?”

“You didn’t know?” Vahn asked, halting as well.

“I swear I didn’t.”

The boy whistled through a gap in his teeth. “Well, that makes things difficult. You don’t want Tache thinking he can take his revenge whenever he wants, any more than you want Wink thinking you’re ungrateful. Either would be really bad.”

“Why is everybody afraid of her?” Cresten asked.

They resumed walking. Already he could smell food. Stew? Roasted meat? Whatever, it made his stomach rumble.

“Well, she’s mad, isn’t she? She’ll say anything, do anything, fight anyone. She’s not afraid, ever, even when she should be. Most say she’ll get herself killed before long. Until then, you don’t want to cross her.”

“Have you seen her fight?”

“Me?” Vahn said, eyes widening. “No. I mean, only on the training grounds. She’s very good. Probably the best we’ve got. I’ve never seen her in a real fight.”

“Have any of your friends?”

“Not that I remember. I’m sure someone has, but...”

Cresten nodded, trying to suppress a grin.

It didn’t work.

“What’s funny?”

“Nothing.” At a skeptical look from his new friend, he said, “She’s managed to make a reputation for herself, and yet none of you has ever seen her do anything that you could actually call unhinged. Whatever else she might be, she’s smart.”

Vahn sent another glance his way. “I have a feeling she’s not the only one.”

As Cresten finished his midday meal, he was approached by a woman wearing a satin robe of blue and gold. She introduced herself as a herald of the palace, and told him he was to follow her to the chambers of the Chancellor. The children around him oohed and ahed at this, as if Cresten had been summoned to a dungeon. Vahn assured him that the chancellor spoke to all new novitiates. He followed the woman from the refectory, feeling small and vulnerable under the scrutiny of so many.

They crossed the middle courtyard to the north keep, and ascended two stairways to a corridor, which ended at a ponderous oaken door. After a brief wait, Cresten was admitted to the chamber.

Portraits of somber men and women adorned the walls. The stone floor was covered by a plush rug woven in shades of brown and gold and blue, and a cage filled with cooing messenger pigeons rested by the shuttered window.

The herald exited, leaving Cresten alone with a slight man who sat at a cluttered desk. Thick white hair framed a tapered face that was the same color as Cresten's. The man's eyes were green, as was his silk robe.

"Mister Padkar, I believe," he said, in a voice higher and softer than Cresten had expected. "I am Banss Samorij, Chancellor of Windhome Palace."

"It's an honor to meet you, Lord Chancellor."

"You are settling in to your new home?" the chancellor asked.

"Yes, thank you."

The man looked him over, the smile crumbling. "Is that a bruise?"

Cresten dabbed at his wound with careful fingers. "Yes, I was... I mean, there was... an accident. Clumsy of me."

"Indeed," the chancellor said, frowning.

"It won't happen again."

"I would hope not. Next time, duck." Amusement lifted the corners of his mouth, and his eyes sparkled with lamplight.

Cresten couldn't help but smile in return. "Yes, Lord Chancellor."

The chancellor reached for a piece of parchment and scanned it. "Your father believes you might be a Spanner. Do you have any idea why he thinks so?"

"No, sir."

"Have you ever used a sextant?"

He shook his head, certain his father would consider his every denial a betrayal.

"You are old for a new arrival. You understand this?"

“Yes, sir.”

“And you understand that we cannot send you back.”

He did. His father had made this clear.

“I’ll learn what I can while I’m here, Lord Chancellor,” he said, trying to sound brave.

“And I’ll try to master Spanning, or Crossing, or even Walking. If the power lies within me, I’ll find it.”

Another smile greeted this. “Well said, Mister Padkar.” He laid the parchment atop a pile on his desk. “I thank you for coming. I hope you’ll be with us for a good many years.”

Cresten stood, recognizing the words as a dismissal. “Thank you, sir. I hope so as well.”

He let himself out of chamber, found the herald awaiting him in the corridor, and followed her to his next lesson.

The days that followed passed in a blur of lessons and training, meals and sleep, conversation and laughter and teasing, some of it playful, some intended as torment. Without realizing it, Cresten had found in Vahn a friend nearly as valuable as Wink. Everyone knew the boy – old and young, boy and girl, Spanner and Crosser and Walker. More, most novitiates liked him, and so many came to like Cresten as well. Perhaps this was what Albon had in mind the morning he first paired them.

It helped that Cresten had made the right enemy. Tache had few friends in the palace, aside from his coterie of sycophants. If Cresten accomplished nothing else in his years in the palace, he would long be remembered for cracking the bore in the mouth.

As it happened, Cresten made a name for himself in other ways, too. He excelled in his

studies. Upon his arrival, the masters placed him in lessons with the youngest children, unsure of how much he had learned prior to reaching Windhome. Within a few days, they realized their error, and let him join the novitiates closer to his age, including Vahn. He was least prepared for advanced history lessons, but they moved him anyway, and instructed him to read what he had missed in his spare moments.

Because he was tall for his age, the masters had placed him with novitiates as old as he on the training ground, and here he struggled to catch up with his peers. With Vahn's help, however, he made progress. It would take him some time to rival the best boys and girls in the group, but after the first turn, he no longer embarrassed himself.

On occasion, as he crossed the courtyards with his new friends, he caught sight of Wink. She never acknowledged him, and Cresten didn't push for more. Tache and his allies kept their distance, rather than challenge Wink's decree that Cresten be left alone.

One night, nearly three turns after his arrival in Windhome, Cresten had to return to the Binder's workshop. Of all the disciplines he studied, his work with sextants and apertures troubled him most. He had never been good with his hands – one more reason why his father had been eager to send him off. He was useless as a craftsman's apprentice, and his father was already training his older brothers to be merchants. How many sons would he need to run the family trade?

On this day, Cresten had marred the arc of the sextant he was building. Binder Komat demanded that he salvage the piece if he could, or start a new one in its place. Cresten managed to correct his mistake, but the work took him nearly two bells. By the time he left the Binder's workshop, he was exhausted.

Stars shone overhead, and a gibbous moon cast long shadows on the rimed tiles of the courtyard. Cresten's breath billowed silver in the moonlight. His steps echoed like pistol fire off the palace façade. He buried his hands in his pockets and walked at a brisk pace.

At a noise from within one of the archways he halted and spun, nearly losing his footing on the frosted stone.

Movement caught his eye, a shadow shifting among shadows, the flicker of shining metal. He took a step in that direction.

“Stay there, shit-beetle.”

He halted. “Wink?”

She emerged into the moonlight a spirecount later, her steps uneven, an odd bulge under her overshirt. As she neared him, Cresten saw that she bore a bruise near her right eye. He also caught the sent of spirit. Wine or whiskey. It had to be on her breath. He nearly asked if she was drunk, but bit back the question.

“What are you doing out here so late?” she asked, her voice throaty, the words running together.

“Coming back from Binder Komat. I wrecked my sextant today and needed to fix it.”

“Komat's an ass. Always has been as far as I can tell.”

His gaze flitted to the bruise, and he sniffed the air again. Her eyes had a glassy look. Despite the moonlight, he could see her color was high.

“Wink, are you all right?”

Her expression turned guarded. “Sure. Why wouldn't I be?” She said it with more clarity, but this seemed to take great effort.

“No reason, I was only... Never mind.”

Guarded gave way to flinty. “I don’t need your worry, shit-beetle. I don’t answer to you.”

“I didn’t say you did.” He stepped around her, muttered “I’m sorry,” and started on toward the keep.

“Shit-beetle, wait.”

Cresten would have preferred to leave her, but he halted. She walked to him.

“I shouldn’t have said that.” The words slurred again. She leaned in. “Can you keep a secret?”

“Of course,” he said, unsure of whether he wanted to hear it.

She bent closer still, hovering over him. The stench of her tainted breath enveloped him.

“I’m the best Spanner here,” she whispered. *ImthbestSpann’rhere*. “These walls can’t hold me.” *Th’sewallscan’thol’m*e.

“I– I know that, Wink. Everyone knows you’re the best.”

Wink shook her head. “You don’t know. No one does. There’s more to me than this place.” She waved a hand, indicating the palace walls. “More than any of you know.” *More’nanyo’youknow*.

“I don’t understand.”

She sobered at this, straightened, backed away.

“It’s nothing. I was... I was joking.”

Cresten didn’t know what to say.

“You’re all right, shit-beetle. Cresten.” She offered a dazed smile. “Go on. It’s late.”

He dipped his chin, confused still, and worried. He tried not to let that show. He raised a

hand in farewell and hurried on to the dormitory.

Cresten didn't see Wink for several days after that, and when at last he did catch a glimpse of her, on a cold, clear afternoon, as he and the other novitiates shuttled between lessons, she was laughing with friends, looking and acting normal. The bruise was gone. She gave no indication of having noticed him.

Later that same day, Cresten left the refectory after the evening meal, flanked by Vahn and a girl named Lenna, who was a year older. The three of them intended to study protocol together in the Windward Keep. As they crossed the courtyard, a figure detached itself from one of the archways and approached them.

Cresten recognized Wink in the dim glow of distant torches; his companions were deep in conversation and didn't spot her until she spoke.

"Padkar."

Thanking the Two that she hadn't called him shit-beetle, he slowed and cast a look at his friends. They eyed him, then Wink.

"He'll catch up with you," Wink said. "Wherever you're going."

Vahn kept walking, eager to keep his distance. Lenna flipped her hair, a haughty indifference in her expression as she regarded Wink a second time.

"Something you want to say to me, Doen?"

Lenna faltered. "No." She followed Vahn.

Their footsteps receded. Other novitiates exited the refectory and made their way to the dormitories, some singly, most in pairs and clusters.

“I think she likes you,” Wink said, staring after Lenna. “She seems jealous.”

“I think she likes Vahn. Everyone likes Vahn.”

Wink didn’t deny it. “Walk with me.” She started toward the lower courtyard.

They crossed in silence through the broad archway that led to Albon’s training ground.

“Do I remember that I spoke to you the other night?”

His mouth went dry. “Which night?”

“It’s all right. I’m not mad at you.”

“We talked, but not a lot. I was on my way to the Leeward Keep, and you were... I think you had other things on your mind.”

A dry laugh escaped her. “Already a master of diplomacy.” She paused, scanned the grounds. He did the same. They were alone.

“Did you tell anyone?” she asked.

“No!”

“Not Marcoji, or Doen, or anyone else? You didn’t mention it to any of the masters?”

“I didn’t say anything to anyone. You told me it was a secret.” He hesitated. “Besides, I’m not sure what I would have told them. I didn’t understand any of it.”

She blew out a breath. “Thank you.”

“What would you have done if I had told someone?”

Wink sidled closer. “I wouldn’t have had a choice. I would have had to slit your throat. Then, when you were dead, I would have cut off your head and limbs, wrapped your parts in old cloth, and dumped you in the privies.”

Cresten gaped, and Wink stared back at him, a strange tension in her face. After a

fivecount, she burst out laughing.

“You believed me!”

He felt his cheeks redden. “No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, shit-beetle, you did.”

He turned away, a grin on his lips. “Yes, I did. That was pretty good.”

She mussed his hair. “You’re all right. Definitely more than others your age.”

“You said something similar to me that night.”

Her smile faded. “What else did I say?”

“You don’t remember?”

“If I did, would I have asked?” She huffed a breath and pushed a clawed hand through her hair. “No, I don’t remember.”

“You were drunk, weren’t you?” Cresten asked. “And you’d been in a fight.”

Wink stood before him for another moment, then pivoted and walked away. “Never mind. Sorry to have taken you away from your friends.”

Cresten remained where he was. “You said you had a life beyond these walls,” he said, taking care not to raise his voice too much. “You said this place couldn’t hold you.”

She paused. “I didn’t know what I was saying. You were right. I was... I’d drunk too much wine. I was talking nonsense.”

“That’s what I thought, too. Then you called Komat an ass, so I assumed you were pretty coherent.”

She laughed, and walked back to where he waited. “You really aren’t what I expected that first night.”

He almost asked her to explain, but wasn't sure he wanted to know. Instead, he said, "I wouldn't tell, Wink. I know I'm just a shit-beetle, but you're my friend, and I wouldn't get you in trouble. I'm trying to understand what happened that night."

Cresten didn't think she would answer. She surprised him.

"I have a... a friend in the city. I visit her sometimes. I Span out of here."

He gaped. "You do?" Leaving the palace could get a novitiate expelled. Even one as old as Wink.

"She hides clothes near her place, and I hide clothes here. I've done it enough that I can Span back and forth in my sleep."

"And you get drunk together?"

She gazed past him. "Sometimes. We went to a tavern that night, and we got in a fight with two sailors from Herjes. Asses."

"That's where you got the bruise."

"A lucky punch." She sounded defensive. "We gave them worse."

"I don't doubt it."

She smiled at that. "Look, it's not... I can take care of myself. I promise. And I don't want anyone else to know."

"Then I won't tell," Cresten said. "You have my word."

"Thanks." She waved him forward. "Come on. We should get you back, before Lenna sends out an army to search for you."

His face warmed again. He returned with her to the middle courtyard.

In the turns that followed, Cresten continued to adjust to life in the palace. His sword work and marksmanship improved, he caught up with his cohort's history lessons, and he discovered that he had a facility with languages, which enabled him to learn the rudiments of Oaqamaran, Aiyanthan, and the common tongue of the Ring Isles. For a time, he convinced himself that all was right with the world. He had found a home. Often he surprised himself by feeling grateful to his parents.

He and Wink passed each other in the refectory several days after their conversation in the courtyard. They didn't speak, but she did nod his way. Similar interactions followed: a shared smile here, a brief greeting there. She no longer ignored him, but neither did she seek him out for conversations. In a sense, his relationship with Wink grew as comfortable as the rest of his life. He could hardly have asked for more.

But with the end of his first year in Windhome, came news he had dreaded.

The novitiates and masters had gathered in the refectory for the evening meal, as they did each night. Before the priestess could lead them in a prayer of thanks, a rising murmur of voices at the front of the hall drew Cresten's attention. The chancellor himself had come. He stepped to a dais near the masters' table.

The man gestured for them to sit and be silent.

As whispered conversations died away, he greeted them in a soft voice. "I am pleased to dine among you this night, and to share with you glad tidings. Fesha Wenikai, known to all of you by the far more friendly sobriquet of Wink, will be leaving Trevynisle tomorrow for a posting as king's Spanner in the royal court of Caszuvaar on Milnos. We wish her good fortune, and pray that the Two bless her through all her years."

“Hear us!” came the reply from all those gathered around the tables.

All, that is, except Cresten. He stood dumbfounded. He craned his neck, seeking Wink. She looked back at him, a sad smile on her lips and an apology in her dark eyes.

Cresten turned again, to find the one other person who would appreciate the significance of Wink’s news.

Tache was watching him, his smile smug and chilling.

Chapter 3

27th Day of Sipar's Waking, Year 616

Wink found him after supper, that same melancholy look on her face.

“You’re going to be all right,” she said, before he could speak. “You’re not the helpless fingerling you were a year ago.”

“I’m not strong enough to fight Tache either.”

She lifted a shoulder. “You’ll be all right,” she repeated.

“I hope you’re happy in Milnos. I’ve heard it’s beautiful there.”

“I’ve never liked the Shield. Or Oaqamar for that matter. I never thought I’d be summoned to either one. Then again, we don’t get to choose so...” She shrugged again.

“Well...” He trailed off, not knowing what to say. “I guess I’ll see you sometime.”

“I suppose so. Be good, shit-beetle.”

“You, too.”

They stood together for another moment. Then they turned simultaneously, he toward the Leeward Keep, she toward the Windward.

Cresten barely slept that night, and he spent much of the next few days peering over his shoulder, expecting to see Tache and his friends bearing down on him.

They caught up with him on the fourth evening after Wink’s departure. Cresten didn’t try to run, knowing any escape he managed would only delay the inevitable.

He held his ground, Vahn and Lenna standing with him.

“Couldn’t get her to take you along, eh?” Tache said, planting himself in front of Cresten.

“I’m sure you begged her.”

“I didn’t. And I never asked her to protect me, either. Her telling people I wasn’t to be touched – that was her idea.”

“You expect us to believe that?”

“Yes.”

Tache faltered, though only for the span of a heartbeat. “It doesn’t matter. She did it, and that kept me from paying you back for that dirty punch you threw.”

Cresten didn’t deny it. It had been unsporting. He understood that now. Wink tried to tell him as much at the time.

“All right.”

The boy frowned. “All right, what?”

“You want to fight me, to set things right. That’s fine.”

Tache grinned, and glanced back at his friends. “You think you can beat me?”

“I know I can’t. You’re right, though: It *was* a dirty punch. You deserve a chance to get back at me.”

“Cresten—”

He raised a hand, silencing Vahn. He didn’t take his eyes off Tache. “It’s the right thing to do,” he said, directing the words at his friend. To Tache he said, “You’ll leave them alone, right? This is just you and me.”

Tache nodded, solemn. “Nobody touches them. My word.”

Cresten backed away a step, removed his overshirt, and handed it to Lenna. Tache

removed his as well.

The two of them began to circle. Cresten tried to put to use some of what he had learned from Albon, and from Vahn. That didn't last long. After Tache's first punch connected high on his cheek, he fought merely to survive. A second blow to his nose drew blood and put him on the ground. He pushed himself to his feet and fought on. He even landed a punch.

Tache staggered back, but soon advanced again, buffeting Cresten with kicks and fists. Cresten had learned to defend himself. He blocked as many punches as got through, but Tache threw a lot of punches.

When he fell a second time, Vahn told him to stay down. He didn't.

After the third time, he tried again to stand, only to find that he couldn't. His vision swam. Blood coursed from his nose, his split lip, a cut below his right eye.

He lay still until he spotted a hand hovering before him. He grasped it and allowed Tache to pull him to his feet.

"We're even," the boy said. "That was... I didn't expect that."

"I did. I knew you pound me bloody."

Tache blinked, then laughed. "Let's get you cleaned up. Or we'll both be scrubbing privies until Kheraya's Awakening."

They walked back to the boy's dormitory, trailed by Tache's followers and Cresten's friends. They washed the blood from Cresten's face and burned his blood-stained shirt in the hearth. The next day, several masters scrutinized his cuts and bruises, but most said nothing. He told those who did ask that he had been practicing hand combat with a friend, and still had much to learn.

The lone exception was Albon, who lifted an eyebrow at the sight of him and said, “Well, that didn’t take long. She’s been gone, what? Five days now?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Keep practicing, Mister Padkar. You’ll get the hang of it.”

So he did. Over the course of his second year and into his third, the movements and tactics drilled into him by the weapons master, and reinforced by his sparring sessions with Vahn, imbedded themselves in his mind and muscles. By his twelfth birthday, he had learned to fight not from memory, but from instinct.

His blade work improved as well. With a sword in hand, his long limbs and lean frame proved an advantage. He wasn’t as strong as many of the other boys, but he could reach them before they reached him. Once he graduated to steel, he would need more strength. For now, with wooden swords, height was more important than power.

He spent most of his time with Vahn, Lenna, and a few of the other novitiates in their group. To his surprise, his fight with Tache had bound them into an unlikely friendship. Tache often invited Cresten to join his group, and not merely as a follower. They sat together at meals, practiced sword work together. The older boy asked Cresten for help with Aiyanthan, which Cresten spoke fluently. Tache even gave Cresten a new nickname: Whip.

“You’re skinny and you’re fast,” Tache said, “and you can do more damage than a person might think.”

Cresten had to admit that he liked it.

Vahn didn’t approve of Cresten’s friendship with the older boy. After a qua’turn during

which he and Cresten didn't share a single meal, he said as much.

"Just because he doesn't want to pummel you anymore, that doesn't mean you have to be his friend."

"I *want* to be his friend. He's pretty nice, once you get to know him."

Vahn's eyebrows lifted in skepticism. Cresten didn't pursue the point.

In truth, Tache wasn't nice. He could be charming and funny, and surprisingly clever. But he spoke ill of other novitiates, and nearly all the masters and mistresses. He longed to be summoned to the royal court in Oaqamar, not only because he coveted the autarch's gold, but also because he wished to Span for the most powerful man in Islevale.

"The palace sells us for gold, right?" Tache said one night, as they walked together through the middle courtyard. "They get as much as they can from the courts. So why shouldn't we want the same? Gold and power. That's what the world is about."

Cresten hadn't given much thought to where he would choose to serve, given the opportunity to decide for himself. He still didn't know if he would ever be called to a court. The masters who specialized in Spanning, Crossing, and Walking only began to train novitiates when the children turned twelve.

Cresten's father had told him he would be a Spanner, mostly because the oldest of his father's aunts was one. Despite what Cresten told the chancellor upon his arrival in the palace, notwithstanding things his father had said to anyone who would listen, Cresten had shown no sign of being a Spanner, or any other sort of Traveler. The tests to which he was subjected soon after coming to Windhome had been inconclusive.

He did know that his father profited from sending him to the palace, and the palace would

profit if and when they sent him to a court. Didn't this prove Tache's point about gold?

"He wants to go to Oaqamar?" Vahn said, when Cresten related the conversation.

"Really?"

"That's what he told me."

Lenna shook her head. "Where he wants to go is..." She made a small motion, brushing away the remark. "Who cares? I mean, the autarch is a pig, but that's not important. What bothers me is that he thinks being a Traveler is his path to wealth. That's just wrong."

She was thirteen now, and well into her training with Master Denmys. To the delight of Chancellor Samorij and the masters and mistresses, the promise of her early tests had been confirmed after her previous birthday: She was that rarest of all Travelers, a Walker. The palace hadn't seen one since the last was summoned to Westisle four years before. Cresten thought her status as a Walker-in-training imbued her opinions with added weight.

He would never have said as much to Tache. Nor did his diminished opinion of the older boy keep him from spending time in Tache's company. His friendship with Tache enhanced his status. It reminded others of their early confrontation, of Wink's protection, and of his bravery in facing Tache after Wink left. He sensed in Vahn's disapproval, the merest hint of envy. And he believed he had risen in Lenna's esteem since his second fight with Tache.

In recent turns it had occurred to him that Lenna was quite pretty. Beautiful, in fact. How had he not seen this before? Her skin was the color of stained cherry wood, her eyes large and dark and liquid. She had silken bronze hair that she often wore tied back from her oval face. She was taller than most novitiates their age, including Vahn, but not quite as tall as Cresten. He thought she liked this about him.

Cresten found excuses to spend time with her, and sensed that she liked this as well. Sometimes they took walks together through the palace grounds – the two of them, without Vahn. He knew Vahn resented this. Probably his friend cared for Lenna as much as he did. But Vahn had lots of friends. Boys and girls gravitated to him. It was harder for Cresten, despite his renown.

Besides, young as he was, he knew that older novitiates sometimes paired off. *Paired*. Two, not three. Cresten didn't want to see his friend hurt, but neither did he want to be hurt himself. The three of them still studied together and ate most of their meals together. But on occasion, Cresten contrived to spend time alone with Lenna. And she allowed it.

On a mild, moonless night late in Sipar's Stirring, the two of them sat in the lower courtyard, staring at a velvet sky, watching for falling stars. They didn't say much. Now and then, one of them pointed up at a silvery streak.

"You're a Walker."

They both jumped at the voice, and scrambled to their feet. Cresten's pulse pounded. Lenna stood so close to him that their shoulders brushed.

"Who's there?" Lenna asked, the words tremulous. "Who are you?"

"I can tell you're a Walker. Your years are altered. You've been practicing."

The voice was that of a child, a girl. She stood a short distance from them, a shadowed form barely visible in the darkness. Light hair shifted in the soft wind, and ghostly eyes reflected the faint, glow of distant torches. She wore rags; her feet were bare. When the breeze lifted, it carried the sick, sweet stench of rotting meat.

"Where did you come from?" Lenna asked, taking half a step in the girl's direction.

Cresten put out a hand to stop her.

“He fears me. He should.”

“Why? Why should we be afraid of you?”

“Not you,” the girl said. She pointed a slender finger at Cresten. “Only him.”

Again he caught the elusive, putrid scent riding the wind.

“Do you smell that?” he whispered to Lenna.

The young girl’s dim features resolved into a scowl. “That’s rude.”

He shouldn’t have been afraid. She was tiny. Yet her tone froze his blood.

Lenna lifted both hands, a gesture intended to calm. “He wasn’t saying it’s you.”

“Yes, he was. And it is.”

Lenna let her hands drop, edged closer to Cresten again. “What are you?” she whispered.

“My kind are called Tirribin. We’re—”

“Time demons.”

Cresten glanced at Lenna, wanting to ask what time demons were.

“That’s a human term,” the girl said in the same tone she’d used to call him rude.

“I– I’m sorry.”

The girl glared. “I was going to say that we’re able to sense your years. Yours are... confused, altered. His aren’t. And he’s young, so they’d be quite lovely to feed on.”

“No!” Lenna said. “I have a riddle!”

The girl eased forward, leaning in their direction, her hands clasped together. “A riddle?” she said, longing in the question.

“That’s right. Only if you swear you won’t hurt either of us, ever.”

“Yes, all right.” She wrung her hands, eyes wide. “What is it? Please.”

“We have your word?”

“Yes!” the demon said, urgency in the word. “I give you my word: I’ll never harm either of you. The riddle! Quickly!”

“All right. It goes like this:

A carpenter, I build without hammer or nail,

A traveler, I journey without wheel or sail;

An artist, my work is the most elegant lair,

A hunter, I rely on the deadliest snare.”

The girl drew a gasping breath, her head twitching side to side, her lips moving. Cresten thought he heard her repeat Lenna’s rhyme.

He bent his head near to Lenna’s and whispered, “Shouldn’t we get away from here?”

“You should. You’re the one in danger. Tirribin don’t prey on Walkers. Our years are different, and they feel a... a kinship with us.”

“How do you know this?”

“My mother’s a Walker. She told me about them. She also taught me the riddle, just in case. You should go.”

“We both should.”

“No. If she can’t work out the riddle, and I’m not here to give her the answer, our bargain is broken. Then we *both* might be in danger.”

“Well, if you’re going to stay, I will, too.”

Lenna’s eyes met his. “That’s... that’s sweet of you.”

Their gazes remained locked, until Cresten realized the demon had ceased her mumbling. He turned, found her studying them.

“You’re young to be in love, aren’t you?”

He colored to the roots of his hair.

“We’re not in love,” Lenna said. “Because you’re right, we are young.”

“*He’s* in love. I can tell. I thought love was something that adult humans did, not children.”

“We’re not—”

“Can you engage in the act of love at your age?”

“That’s not—” Lenna shook her head, clearly flustered. “Work out your riddle, before I tell you the answer and ruin it for you!”

The demon eyed them, then lifted a shoulder and went back to her mutterings and the strange movements of her head.

Lenna stared at the ground, refusing to look Cresten’s way. She had moved away from him. Not far, but enough to keep him rooted to where he stood. Cresten watched the demon, afraid of what she might do. Every so often, he peeked at Lenna, but she remained as she was, silent and withdrawn.

Eventually, the girl approached them, hands intertwined and twisting.

“What is it?” Her voice was pitched higher than before. “You have to tell me what it is.”

“A spider,” Lenna said, the word coming out low and flat. “The answer is a spider.”

The Tirribin closed her eyes and let out a sigh. “A good riddle. Very good. You must ask me another some day. That was... exquisite.”

Lenna didn't answer, nor did Cresten.

The girl frowned. "Something's happened. What's the matter?"

You happened, Cresten wanted to say. *You came and ruined everything.*

Lenna fixed a brittle smile on her lips. "Everything's fine. We have to go now."

The girl's puzzlement deepened. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make your love stop."

"We already told you, we weren't in love." Lenna raised a hand in farewell. "Goodnight."

She started away.

Cresten followed.

"Droë."

"What?"

"That's my name: Droë."

"Oh. I'm Lenna. This is Cresten."

The demon nodded. "All right. Goodnight, then."

They continued toward the middle courtyard. Lenna strode with purpose, her arms crossed over her chest. Cresten walked beside her, dismal, unsure of what to say. *He's in love. I can tell...* He winced at the truth of this, and at the things Droë said next. He'd done nothing wrong, but that didn't matter. Lenna's embarrassment, and his own, if he was honest with himself, had opened a chasm between them. He had no idea how to cross.

He followed Lenna to the entrance to the Windward Keep, because he didn't know what else to do.

She paused on the threshold, seemed to force herself to face him.

"Goodnight, Cresten."

“Goodnight. I’ll see you tomorrow, right?”

“Of course. We have lessons, and training.”

“And I’ll see you at breakfast?”

She hesitated. “Yes, I suppose so.”

Not the answer he’d wanted, but what could he do?

“All right then. Goodnight.” He’d already said that.

He spun away and stalked across the open space to the Leeward Keep. He felt he’d been robbed of something precious.

Cresten lay awake for much of the night, trying to convince himself that their embarrassment would pass, and that everything between them would go back to how it had been.

It didn’t. Lenna, Vahn, and he sat together at breakfast, but what little she said she directed at Vahn. Vahn couldn’t conceal his pleasure at this development. He wasn’t the type to gloat, but he made no attempt to draw Cresten into their conversation. Just as Cresten hadn’t scrupled to draw Lenna away from the other boy, now Vahn did all he could to win her back. Cresten couldn’t blame him. Rather, he focused all his ire and resentment on the time demon.

Her questions had been foolish, mortifying, even inappropriate. He and Lenna were children, and she was asking them about... about things no child should have to discuss. No wonder Lenna was humiliated; no wonder she could barely bring herself to look at him.

For days he brooded, watching Vahn and Lenna grow closer, feeling ever more superfluous to both of them. It was like falling down a stairway one tread at a time. Each new impact jarred him, and he knew the next would hurt more, but he didn’t know how to stop or

how to shield himself from the pain. All he could do was fall.

After a quarter turn, Cresten gave up eating with his friends. His presence made Lenna uncomfortable, and being with the two of them made him feel like a third oar on a dory.

At that evening's meal, he sat alone far from Vahn and Lenna's table. The palace chef had prepared roasted fowl with baviseed and greens. It was one of Cresten's favorites, but he picked at the food, hardly eating.

"Why aren't you with that pretty Walker?"

Cresten peered up from his platter. Tache and his friends stood around him, their own platters in hand.

He shrugged.

The others sat, Tache taking the spot beside Cresten. His friends resumed conversations of their own, but not Tache.

"I see her," he said. "She's with your friend, Marcoji."

"I know." He had no interest in discussing this part of his life with the older boy, not that Tache would care.

"I thought she fancied you, not him."

"She did, I think. Once."

Tache smirked. "You foul it up? Say something stupid?"

"Not me, but that's what happened."

"What do you mean, not you? Did someone backbite you? Someone I know?"

This was part of Tache's charm, the thing about him that Vahn and Lenna couldn't have grasped without knowing him as Cresten did. He was mean and full of bluster and motivated by

pride, greed, and spite. But once he accepted someone as a friend, as he had Cresten, he was loyal to a fault.

“Tell me who it was, Whip. I’ll beat him bloody.”

“It’s not like that. I don’t think you should get involved.”

Tache’s expression frosted. “You think I couldn’t take him?”

“It’s not a him. It’s not even—” He broke off, shaking his head. “I shouldn’t have mentioned it.”

“Not even a what?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Cresten reached for a piece of bread. Tache seized him by the wrist, grinding the bones in a pincer grip.

“Ow!”

“Not even a what?” he demanded again.

Cresten yanked his hand away. “Not even a person,” he said, rubbing his wrist, and not caring that he sounded like a sullen child. “We were talking to a Tirribin.”

Tache’s ire gave way to calculation, and thinly masked eagerness.

“A Tirribin,” he said. “You’re sure.”

“Lenna was sure. I’d never heard of them before.”

“Of course. A time demon would be interested in your Walker friend. Anything having to do with time.”

Cresten nodded, pretending he knew, hoping Tache would say more. Perhaps if he learned about Droë and her kind, he might find a way back into Lenna’s good graces.

That avid gleam lingered in the boy's eyes. "They're a menace, of course, like all demons. But old as they are, they're more like children than like other Ancients, so how dangerous can they be?"

"Lenna seemed pretty scared. I think they're more dangerous than they look."

"This one was in the palace?" Tache asked, ignoring Cresten's warning.

"On the grounds. Lower courtyard."

"Interesting," the boy said. "I wonder if she comes here a lot. If they're drawn to Walkers, then this would be the place, wouldn't it? Not recently, maybe, but the palace has seen lots of Walkers over the years. And Tirribin live a long time. Centuries. Maybe more. Imagine the stuff she might know."

"I'd rather not," Cresten said. "I'd prefer never to see her again."

Tache laughed and thumped him on the back. "You're thinking about this all wrong, Whip. Never mind the Walker. Sure, she's pretty, but there's others prettier. You'll forget her before long. That time demon, though – her kind know things. They can tell when time is different, and they remember stuff the rest of us don't."

Tache's excitement insinuated itself into Cresten.

"The demon said something like that. She could tell Lenna had been Walking. She said her years were... were changed somehow." He reached for the memory. "'Confused,' she said."

"Yeah, I'll bet she has all sorts of information. Knowledge of this place, the masters and mistresses. She might be able to read our futures."

"I don't know if--"

"The lower courtyard, you said."

Cresten faltered. Hurt as he was by Lenna's recent treatment, he regretted having revealed so much. It felt like a betrayal.

“Whip?”

He twitched a shoulder. “It was only that one time. I don't think she comes there a lot.”

“Well, I suppose we'll find out, won't we?”

A betrayal of her trust, of what they'd shared that evening and before, of their entire friendship, however brief it had been. He should have said nothing. He should have lied.

He reached for the bread again. This time Tache let him eat. Later, as Cresten gathered his platter and utensils to leave, Tache stopped him.

“You let me know if you see her again, you understand?”

“The— the Tirribin, you mean?”

Tache laughed too loudly. “Of course. You think I care if you see your Walker friend again?”

“Right. Sure I will.”

He scuttled away, refusing to glance back, despite the laughter that chased him from the table. He didn't look at Lenna and Vahn either. Not since his first night, years ago, had he felt so alone.

Cresten tried to avoid them all – Tache, Lenna, Vahn, the time demon – but the palace, which he thought so huge when he arrived, now proved to be terribly small.

A ha'turn after their first encounter with the Tirribin, as Cresten walked back toward the keep from another late session with the Binder, he heard Tache call to him.

He slowed, unable at first to spot the older boy. Tache materialized out of the darkness,

pale eyes shining.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” he said. “She’s down there again.”

Cresten didn’t have to ask who he meant.

“I don’t want to go, Tache.”

“I don’t care. I want to meet the Tirribin. You’re going to introduce us.”

What could he do? He followed Tache to the lower courtyard, where Lenna and the demon – Droë – stood together in the bone-white gleam of a half moon.

As they neared the pair, Lenna spun. Seeing who had come, she glowered, flicking a glance at Tache before directing the full weight of her anger on Cresten.

“What are you doing here?”

“I wanted a word with your friend,” Tache said, though she hadn’t asked the question of him.

“*You* wanted,” she fired back. “What business does a mediocre Spanner have with a Tirribin?”

“Careful, Doen,” he said, velvet menace in his voice. “You may be a Walker, and the masters’ favorite, but I don’t tolerate that from anyone.”

She glared at Cresten again. “How could you bring him here?”

I didn’t bring him. He made me do this. The denials withered before he could give them voice. If she hadn’t hated him before, she did now.

“I’ve always wanted to meet a Tirribin,” Tache said, looking past Lenna to the time demon.

Cresten could see her more clearly this night. Moonlight illuminated dark, perfect

features – high cheekbones, a delicate nose, full lips – and lent its glow to long, golden hair. Her eyes, as light and haunting as they had been during that first encounter, registered amusement.

“I almost never wish to treat with humans, unless they happen to be Walkers.” She shifted her gaze to Lenna. “Did he threaten you a moment ago? I thought I heard a threat in what he said.”

“You can read the future can’t you?”

She ignored Tache, her attention still on Lenna, a question in her raised eyebrows.

“Yes, he threatened me, but it’s not important.”

“Hey!” Tache snapped his fingers. “I asked you a question.”

Droë’s smile slipped. “He’s quite rude. I don’t think I like him.” She lifted her chin in Cresten’s direction. “What about this one? Is he still your friend? Something’s changed.”

Yes, you changed it.

“He’s still my friend,” Lenna said.

His eyes met hers. He read an apology in her glance, and also forgiveness. He essayed a smile, but she had already turned away, back to Tache.

“You should leave,” she said.

Tache shook his head. “I’m not finished speaking with your friend. I want an answer to my question. Can you read the future?”

“No,” Droë said, ice in her tone, her expression, her very stance. “That’s not how our powers work. I read time. I can tell when years don’t match the person, or when time has been altered. You want a Seer, not a Tirribin.”

“I think you’re lying. Tirribin are supposed to be powerful. What you’re talking about...”

He shook his head. "It's nothing. It's nonsense." A breeze stirred the air, and Tache wrinkled his nose. "What is that stink?" He frowned at Droë. "Is that you?"

"He's very, very rude," the Tirribin said.

She continued to glower, and she opened her mouth, revealing small, dagger-sharp teeth. At the sight of them, Cresten backed away.

"You're right, Droë," Lenna said. "He is. I'm leaving. You and I can speak another time."

She tried to walk past Tache, but he grabbed her arm, spinning her around. She gave a small cry and struggled to break free.

"You're not leaving until I'm done talking to the demon."

Cresten took a step toward Tache.

"Release her," Droë said.

Tache grinned. "Not yet. Tell me what else you can do."

"Release her or pay in years." A rasp roughened the threat.

Lenna ceased her struggles, her eyes going wide. "Droë, no!"

Tache let go of her and raised his hands for the Tirribin to see. "No need to get angry," he said. "She's fine."

Lenna stumbled away from him.

"You," Droë said to Lenna, her voice grating still. "And that one." She indicated Cresten with another nod. "That was our arrangement."

"Yes, but—"

Lenna had time for no more. In a blur of golden, moon-touched hair, wraithlike eyes, and breadknife teeth, the Tirribin launched herself at Tache.

He managed a truncated scream, fell under the fury of her assault. Fists flailing, feet lashing out, he tried to fight her off, but she held fast to him, her mouth at his throat, a nimbus of sliding colored light surrounding them both.

Lenna screamed, but didn't move. Cresten thought he should try to pull Droë off the boy, but he was too horrified to make the attempt, too frightened of what the Tirribin might do to him.

He heard voices and footsteps. Others approached from the upper courtyards. Novitiates and at least one master. As they drew near, Droë lifted her head from Tache's still form. She eyed Lenna and then Cresten before dashing away. After a few strides, she blurred to unearthly speed. Cresten lost sight of her.

He crept closer to Tache's body. The boy stared at the stars with lifeless eyes, his cheeks sunken, his skin desiccated, as if he had died days ago. Cresten sensed Lenna beside him. She drew a sharp breath and screamed again. He reached for her, intending to comfort. She shrank from his touch.