

TIME’S ASSASSIN, Book III of the Islevale Cycle

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30th Day of Sipar’s Settling, Year 633

They fall out of the gap onto a strand south of the Notch, flame-lit, the sand firmed by rain. Twelve of them in all. Orzili and his assassins, and eight uniformed Sheraighs from Hayncalde Castle.

Lenna has come from the future to warn him that he failed once at this. Hence the extra soldiers. Surely twelve should be enough to overpower a Walker and a princess. Tobias will not—cannot—escape him again.

The boy and a woman Orzili doesn’t know stand before them, grim and drenched. The woman raises a musket to her shoulder. Tobias trains his pistol on Orzili, his other arm cradling the infant princess to his chest. Firelight warms Tobias’s scarred face and glimmers in his eyes. Orzili senses that men and women gather around the fire behind him, closer than he would prefer. He doesn’t care.

“Good evening, Tobias,” he says, baring his teeth in a smile. “We’ve been looking for you.” He raises his pistol. “Put down your weapons, or I’ll kill the princess.” He glances at the woman but senses that she won’t act without leave from Tobias.

“We won’t,” Tobias says. “Drop yours or we’ll kill you where you stand.”

“Brave words, but you’re outnumbered.”

“That doesn’t matter. We’re leaving here tonight, and I won’t let you stop us.”

Orzili laughs. “Leaving? Why should I care if you leave? I can track you anywhere. Don’t you understand that by now?” He gestures at the golden tri-sextants wielded by his assassins. “With these devices, I can go anywhere I wish, armed and accompanied by soldiers. You won’t escape me again.” He flashes another grin at the woman. “He isn’t as pretty as he once was. I’m sorry for that. Couldn’t be helped. Shall I tell you how he wept at the mere thought of being subjected to more torture? Shall I tell you how he screamed and begged us for mercy?”

She casts a pitying look at Tobias but holds her musket steady.

“Give me the princess,” Orzili says to this boy in a man’s body. “Or die. Those are your choices.”

Tobias says nothing.

“I can spare your companion. She need not die. The two of you can go free. Just give me the child. Everything else is negotiable.”

“No.”

“What do you think to gain?” Orzili asks. “As I’ve already said, we can find you anywhere.”

The woman’s musket booms. Tobias staggers, and the princess screams, flailing in his arms. Orzili can’t help but flinch as well.

Yet, only when he sees what she has shot does he recognize the danger. One of the tri-sextants lies on the wet sand, gleaming with firelight, dented, bent, useless. The assassin who

held it rubs his hand. The woman has dropped her musket and produced from within her overshirt two pistols.

“You can’t follow us anywhere now,” she says.

Orzili levels his pistol at Tobias again. “That was foolish!”

“Actually,” the boy says with a grin, “I think it was bloody brilliant.”

The Sheraighs grip their weapons. Men and women near the fire shout. Orzili peers back at them. Many hurry in their direction. Perhaps bringing uniformed soldiers was a mistake. This can’t end badly again.

“What are you waiting for?” he demands of the soldiers.

Before he can say more, the woman fires both her weapons. Two soldiers drop to the sand, both bleeding from chest wounds. She’s good.

Reports echo from the crowd behind him, and bullets whistle past. The surviving soldiers dive to the sand, as do Orzili’s men. Orzili roars his frustration.

Seeing Tobias hesitate, he raises his own pistol again and fires.

At the same time, Tobias wrenches away, seeking to shield the princess. The babe’s screams spiral into the night. Tobias cries out as well and collapses, still clutching her to him. Blood glistens on his sleeve.

Orzili’s assassins and the soldiers will fight off the rest. Or not. He is intent on killing the princess. He draws his dagger and throws himself onto Tobias and the child.

The woman screams a warning. More pistol fire crackles.

Orzili drives his blade toward Tobias’s face. The boy catches him by the wrist, fights him off. He’s stronger than Orzili would have guessed, but Orzili has the advantage. He forces the

point of the knife closer to the boy's eye. Tobias's arms shake. He gives way, grudgingly, but inexorably.

Orzili hammers his free fist into the bloody bullet wound on Tobias's arm.

The boy bellows but still holds fast to Orzili's blade hand.

Orzili feels him reaching for something, pounds at the wound yet again. He pushes himself up and punches the boy in the face. Tobias's eyes glaze.

Orzili rears back for one final, killing thrust of his knife.

And agony sears his leg. The boy's blade. Orzili roars, rolls away, the blade ripping his flesh. The pain redoubles, and he howls again. Tobias grabs for his pistol.

Blood gushes from the gash in Orzili's thigh. He's already fired his weapon. People from across the strand converge on them, some loading weapons, others aiming. Most of the Sheraighs lie dead, as do two of his men. Three soldiers flee northward, back to the city.

Orzili has little choice but to do the same. He hobbles away as fast as he can, discards his weapon, clutches his sextant. He expects at any moment to be shot in the back.

A pistol thunders. Anguish explodes below his shoulder. He stumbles, rights himself, runs on. As he limps over the wet sand, he sheds clothing, his shoulder and leg screaming in protest, until, at last, he is naked. He aims his sextant and with a twitch of his thumb activates the device. The familiar tug jerks him forward, out of firelight, beyond the crash and retreat of the surf and the cries of the princess, still alive. Another failure.

The gap swallows him.

Chapter 1

11th day of Sipar's Waking, Year 619

The bells tolling in the ward outside her shuttered window were a summons to the king's court. They had been every day since her arrival in Herjes. They should have roused her from her bed today.

Lenna remained where she was, buried beneath woven blankets, curled in a tight ball, her face damp with tears.

Her entire body hurt: her jaw tender and tight where he had hit her, her back and hips and thighs aching from her vain attempts to fight him off, her most private places abused. Her spirit was broken as well; she was too humiliated to call for the castle's healer, too ravaged to stand before the king and his court, too weak to kill the bloody fiend. She loathed herself.

Yet, that wasn't even the worst of it.

Eight turns had passed since she arrived in Herjes from Windhome—Jispar IV's new Walker, celebrated throughout the royal city of Vondehm, feted with a dizzying ceremony in the king's throne room and a sumptuous feast afterward. She tripped through that day in a haze, overwhelmed, brimming with pride and excitement. If only her parents and sisters could see her!

Soldiers in green and silver livery, their faces marked with the intricate black etchings for which Herjes was known, bowed to her as they would to royalty. Ministers welcomed her as an equal.

The twin doors outside the king's chamber stole her breath: carved in the form of a great

serpent, coiled, head reared to strike, inset pearls for eyes. And yet this was nothing compared to the interior. The walls were curved, the chamber a great circle. Glazed windows looked out over an enormous garden, and a thick, woven rug covered a floor of pink marble. As in the chancellor's chamber in Windhome, colorful tapestries hung along the walls and a pigeon cage rested by the window to the right of the door, the birds it held cooing softly. There was a standing desk beside it, broader than the chancellor's, and far less neat. These common furnishings, though, were the only similarities Lenna could see between this chamber and the one she remembered from Windhome palace. Comparing the two rooms was akin to equating a common Kant to an Oaqamaran Marauder.

Directly in front of her, a throne gilded in silver rested on a raised dais made of some dark, finely grained wood. And upon the throne sat her king, the man who had paid to bring her here.

Jispar accepted her obeisance—three prostrations, as was expected of newcomers to the court—with a smile and a lingering gaze that warmed her cheeks. He stood then and walked to her, a welcome on his lips. She heard none of what he said.

She was barely fifteen years old, an innocent in matters of the heart and the body. If asked, she would have said that she'd never had a romance with a boy in Windhome. Yes, she had cared for Cresten, before their encounter with the Tirribin, Droë, before Tache's death and all that followed. But they had been children, she and Cresten both.

This king, Jispar—he was something entirely different. He was... He was stunning. He stood at least three hands taller than she, and she had long considered herself tall for a girl her age. His chest and shoulders were broad, powerful. She thought him relatively young—late

twenties, or perhaps—*perhaps*—early thirties. Flowing black hair, full lips, dark eyes, and a complexion somewhere between the blanched pinks of the Inner Ring, and the dark browns of Lenna's fellow novitiates in Windhome. Black etchings spiraled around his right eye and down over his cheek and jawline, giving him a fearsome aspect. His smile, however, revealed perfect white teeth and crinkles around his eyes and mouth. With every change in expression, every raised eyebrow and quirk of his lips, the markings on his face shifted so that they seemed alive.

He wore a loose ivory tunic and satin breeches of green and silver. A silver crown rested on an emerald cushion beside the throne, along with a scepter of silver and crystal.

Throughout that first day, he was so intent upon her that she might as well have been the only person in his court. He walked her through his gardens and down one wondrous corridor of his palace after another, acting as chaperone and guide and companion. Women in the court, those wearing diaphanous gowns rather than ministerial robes, followed her with their glares, or gazed possessively at their liege. At the time, Lenna hardly cared. She basked in his attentions, in his words of welcome, in his recitation of her pedigree and the words of praise he read from the letter of introduction sent by Windhome's chancellor.

She blushed when he took her arm and hung on his every word as he spoke of art and history, of Herjean customs and luminaries and conquests. At the banquet, he had her sit at his right hand, and after the stewards filled their cups with Brenthian white, he and all his guests rose in tribute to her. Later, when the platters had been cleared and musicians began to play in the hall, he danced with her, his warm, strong hand pressed to her back, his eyes holding hers.

Lenna retired to her chamber that night breathless and smitten. But still naïve.

When she was summoned to Jispar's chamber five nights hence, she assumed he wished

to speak with her of a Walk he needed her to complete or—dare she think it?—wanted to include her in a discussion with his most trusted ministers.

A guard, silent and severe, steered her through torchlit corridors to the king's quarters and ushered her inside. There, she found Jispar alone, dressed in satin sleeping garments, the chamber lit by the hearth fire and candles that smelled of bay and musk.

His eyes glinted like onyx, and the smile with which he greeted her was harder than the one she recalled from the day she arrived. The writhing of those marks around his eye put her in mind of snakes. She shrank from him and his grin sharpened.

She turned from the memory then, burrowed deeper beneath her blanket. He had sent guards for her many times since. Too often. Once, when she refused his summons, he came to her chamber, beat her, and took what he wanted anyway.

That should have ended her resistance. Surely, the king expected it would.

But Lenna was not one to surrender. She was a Walker of Windhome, raised by parents who possessed next to nothing but lived and loved and thrived anyway. Jispar's assaults awakened the pride her mother and father had instilled in her when she was little more than an infant.

Lenna continued to resist, to endure the beatings, the violations. He wouldn't kill her. She knew this. He had paid handsomely to bring her to Vondehm, in part because having a Windhome-trained Walker enhanced the standing of his court. He also wouldn't back down. She knew this as well, steeled herself to whatever would come.

So she believed.

He had brutalized her again just last night. That, however, was not why she hid beneath

her blankets, why she shed tears and ached deep in her chest. She had put up with his cruelty for nearly eight turns and would for as long as she had to until she could escape this place, or rid herself of the king.

No, it was a different exigency of time that kept her huddled in the warmth of her bed—equally stark, as immutable as the tide.

Two turns had passed since her last bleeding.

Each day for some time now, she had awakened feeling queasy, a sour coating on her tongue. This morning, upon waking, she vomited until her stomach was empty and her throat ached.

Innocent though she might have been not so long ago, she had never been a fool. She carried Jispar's child in her womb. Pride was one thing, but this... She wanted to die.

On the thought, her mood shifted subtly. Why not die?

If she could have killed the king, she would have, but she knew that was next to impossible. He was guarded night and day by the fiercest warriors in all Herjes. He had tasters for each meal, even for his midday tea and his evening wine. And even if she managed to evade the soldiers and attack him, using the skills she had honed in the lower courtyard of the Travelers' Palace, Jispar himself was said to be a skilled swordsman. He was canny, cruel, as strong as a Presziri horse.

That said, he did have a weakness: All in his court knew that he wanted a son. Desperately.

For the first time since this nightmare began, she considered taking her own life. Not out of despair, but as an act of defiance. She would tell the king that she carried his child—she might

even claim she knew it to be a boy. Walker magick could tell her such things, she would say. She doubted he would know enough to question this. And then she would kill herself, and the babe with her.

Grim purpose, but purpose nevertheless. Lenna stretched, winced, threw off her blanket, and swung herself out of bed. She splashed cold water on herself, rinsed her mouth, and spat into her chamber pot. She dragged a comb through her bronze hair and perfumed it. Last, she donned her ministerial robe. Green and silver, of course. In those first days, she had worn Herjes' colors with pride. Now they reeked of him, like everything else. Like her.

She could not hide the bruising on her face, and she would not go to the healer, even now, having come to this decision. She would enter the king's hall with her chin raised. Strength. Pride. Folly, perhaps. One did what was required to endure.

Lenna followed the maze of corridors to the hall, swept past the guards who opened the twin doors for her, and entered the hall. It was crowded. A blessing. Some by the doors marked her entrance. A few stared at her bruised jaw. Most in the grand chamber took no notice of her. She skirted the edge of the throng, making her way to the cluster of ministers flanking the throne. As she walked, she tried to hear what was being said. She gathered that Jispar had consented to an audience with subjects of his kingdom who wished to petition the crown for some small boon or mercy.

Another stroke of fortune. None would presume to ask a favor of the king that involved his Walker. Perhaps Jispar was unaware of her absence and late arrival.

She reached the rear of the hall, slipped in behind the Minister of Protocol, offered a weak smile when he glanced back at her. His gaze dipped to her chin before he faced front again.

He had served in this court long enough to know how she had come by the bruise.

She heard little of what was said to or by the king. Periodically, polite applause rippled through the hall, acknowledging Jispar's magnanimity. Each time, of course, Lenna clapped with the rest. The morning crawled by. Her stomach remained unsettled, but now discomfort warred with hunger.

At last, a sharp noise echoed through the chamber—the rapping of a staff butt on the marble floor. A guard announced that the audience was over, and men and women began to shuffle out of the hall. When the citizenry was gone, the king's ministers exited the chamber as well. Before long, Lenna, a few guards, the king's page, and Jispar himself were the only ones left in the hall.

The king regarded her, his expression revealing nothing, the etching quiescent for now.

“You wish to speak with me?”

Her gaze flicked to the guards.

“Leave us,” Jispar told them. “Close the door.” He eyed her jaw. When they were alone, he said, “You should see the healer about that.”

“Are you concerned for me, or for your reputation?”

Jispar laughed, not kindly. “Neither. What is it you want?”

Bastard. “I thought you should know. I’m...” She swallowed. “I’m with child.”

“It’s about bloody time, isn’t it?”

She felt like she’d been slapped. “What?”

“I’d been wondering how long it would take. With the others, it happened a good deal sooner. How far along?”

“Um...” She gave a small shake of her head, racing to catch up with the exchange. “A turn or two. No more.”

“I see.” He considered her, eyes narrowing, the black lines on his face stirring. “I’ve wondered if a child of ours might someday become a Walker. Do you think that’s possible?”

Only if it lives.

“I wouldn’t know.”

“My liege,” he said, his tone pointed.

Lenna dropped her gaze. “My liege.”

“Well, I’m grateful to you for letting me know. I will inform the palace stewards. Anything you need will be provided, of course. I will expect you to fulfill your responsibilities to this court, until such time as you no longer can.”

“Yes, my liege.”

He picked up the silver bell from beside the crystal scepter and gave it a sharp shake. Before the sound of it died away, several guards, the page, and a pair of stewards had entered the hall once more.

“Is that all?” Jispar asked, in a tone that made clear he had already dismissed her.

What could she say? “Yes, my liege.” She curtsied, straightened, and hurried from the chamber, her breath coming in shallow gasps.

Rage, shame, contempt for herself—these followed her through the corridors and out into bright sun and a cool northerly wind.

Once in the gardens, away from the scrutiny of others, she allowed herself to cry, tears burning like acid.

It's about bloody time...

Demons take him!

She hadn't told him it was a boy, as she had intended. Not that he would care.

Why—*why!*—when he asked whether their child might be a Walker, hadn't she said yes?

If she couldn't deprive him of the son he so fervently wanted, she could dangle before him the possibility of bearing him a Walker before she ripped away his hope.

With the others it happened sooner...

How many others? Did this child matter to him at all? Did she, beyond the expenditure of gold that brought her here?

Would he care when she killed herself?

This question she could answer with confidence. He wouldn't care in the slightest. She was no more to him than a whore who could Walk through time. He would enter her death into a ledger, an asset lost, gold spent and wasted, akin to a ship lost at sea, or a horse gone lame.

Except she was reasonably certain that he loved his mounts.

So why die for him?

She heard the question in her father's voice, a remnant of a childhood forever lost.

Why spend your own life when he is the one who ought to die?

"I could be killed in the attempt," she whispered, as if in conversation.

Wouldn't that be a better death?

Lenna placed a splayed hand on her belly. Wasn't her child more deserving of life than Jispar? If nothing else, didn't she owe herself and the babe the possibility of a future beyond this castle?

So be it then. She would kill the king or die making the attempt. But how?

She could Walk back in time, of course. That was her greatest gift, her most valuable talent.

Yet, as with all else, Jispar exercised strict control over her, over all his Travelers. He kept their Bound devices—her chronoform, the Spanners' sextants, the Crossers' apertures—which, in fairness, were purchased for them with Herjean gold, always locked away in his treasury. Only when the king wished for one of the Travelers to Walk or Span or Cross did he allow them access to the devices. From all she had been taught in Windhome, and all she had heard from her fellow Travelers in the castle, this was highly unusual. Most royals bestowed the devices on their Travelers, and thereafter, they were treated as the property of those who could use them.

Even if she could think of a way to kill him that involved Walking back through time, she would need to request that he give her the chronoform, or she would have to steal it from the treasury. Impossible.

In truth, she didn't see how a Walk would help her anyway. Traveling to any time since her arrival in Vondehm would leave her with the same obstacles she faced now: his constant vigilance, his guards, and his own prowess as a fighter. Going back farther, to a day before her arrival in his court, would only compound her disadvantages, make him that much harder to reach.

It occurred to her that if she offered freely what he had taken thus far, she might get close enough.

"No," she whispered in the sunlight.

She would kill him or fail, survive or die. She would not abase herself by insinuating herself into his bed. Better to make no attempt at all.

Lenna wandered the gardens for some time before returning to her chamber, no closer to a plan, but fully resolved to see her dark ambitions through to their conclusion. She had been a victim of Jispar's depredation for long enough. From this time forth, he was her prey, even if he didn't know it.

Days passed, measured by mornings of sickness, pointless audiences with the king and his court, and nights of fruitless plotting. To her relief, Jispar no longer summoned her to his bed or forced himself into hers. It seemed his goal had been to get her with child. No doubt he had moved on to some new conquest, someone more compliant than she. Lenna was certain there were plenty of women in the court who would have welcomed the king's advances.

She had yet to decide how to kill him, despite considering the problem day and night. He did like to hunt, usually in the forest lands north of Vondehm, leagues from the castle and his army. Guards accompanied him, of course, but a small contingent.

Lenna hadn't yet decided what to do with this information, but his hunts struck her as the best opportunities she might have to carry out his assassination.

She wondered if she might ride out to the woodland on her own—she did have some time to herself—to scout the terrain and find a place where she might ambush Jispar. During her years in Windhome, she had been more skilled with a sword than a bow, but she was competent with both. If she learned beforehand where he planned to ride, she could lie in wait for the king, slay him with an arrow, and escape the forest unnoticed.

Or maybe she could simply sprout wings and carry him off like a Belvora.

Her scheming consumed her thoughts. Notions of how she might murder the king accompanied her everywhere she went, including Jispar's hall. She knew the danger, but she couldn't help herself. Each time she saw the man, each time she heard him speak, or recalled once again his brutal assaults, her hunger for his death deepened.

So it was this day, as she took her place with the other ministers at the edges of the hall near his throne. So close that she could have killed him with a thrown blade.

She barely heard when the king's herald announced the morning's visitors to the Herjean court. Something about emissaries from Milnos. The names given by the herald meant little to her, and she paid little heed to Jispar as he greeted his visitors with platitudes and meaningless niceties.

When she paused to study the delegation from Milnos, however—eight guards in uniforms of blue and vibrant green, the minister who appeared to lead the delegacy, and one other figure standing beside the minister—her knees nearly gave out. That last one already watched her, recognition in the intensity of his gaze.

Surely she would have noted his name, had she heard it. Could she be mistaken? At this distance it was possible. But see how he watched her, how he communicated with the most minute shake of his head that she should pretend not to know him, how he pointedly shifted his attention back to Jispar—who still spoke—indicating that she should do the same.

She did, but only for an instant. Her eyes found him again. What name had he used? And why?

And what was he doing here, really? Was it chance, or the Two, or some darker purpose that had brought Cresten Padkar back into her life?

Chapter 2

19th day of Sipar's Waking, Year 619

His face was much as she remembered: his chin square, his eyes widely spaced, his lips full. Time had sharpened his cheekbones, melted the softness that once rounded his jaw. He wasn't a boy anymore. He was taller than she recalled, his body now tapered and lean. Enough remained of the lad she had called her friend that she had no doubt as to his identity. Enough had changed to make her stare and stare again.

She had always thought him nice-looking. Kind hazel eyes and a boyish smile in an open, friendly face. Now he was more. Hardened in some way. She saw in his mien and bearing less trust, less welcome. His features, chiseled, the color of the finest dark woods from the Labyrinth, gave away nothing. His gaze—keen, intelligent—shifted constantly, seeming to assess risk and opportunity. It occurred to her that living in the streets of Windhome would have forced such changes upon him. He would have had no choice but to become a creature of the lanes. Did he blame her? He had shouldered responsibility for the events leading to Tache's death, leaving the palace so that she might have a future as a Walker. Had he come to exact some measure of revenge or recompense?

And how had he found his way to the court of Milnos? He wore robes of emerald and blue, and he clutched a golden sextant in his right hand. He had done better for himself than she had imagined he could as an exile from the palace. He had a tale to tell, and she longed to hear it.

Where a tencount before Lenna had been content in her oblivion, largely unaware of what

was said in the hall, now she hung on every word, trying to make up for what she had missed.

The older man with Cresten—black-haired, short, and rotund, also dressed in ministerial robes—was Milnos’s minister of protocol. According to those around her, they had come to continue negotiations on a new treaty of trade between Herjes and the Shield. Lenna guessed that Cresten had accompanied the minister so that he might Span back and forth between the isles to facilitate the minister’s consultations with his king. The Milnosian guards joined the soldiers of Herjes in a tight cluster at the far end of the hall.

Cresten’s glance flicked her way again, both guarded and avid. She reconsidered. Milnos’s king might have sent him as a courier, but Cresten had come for reasons of his own.

Jispar had arranged for a midday feast to welcome his guests, and now he called forth musicians and dancers for their entertainment. Cresten and the minister of protocol took seats near the throne, their backs to Lenna and the rest of the Herjean court. She had little patience for such diversions. Questions burned in her chest, demanding answers.

More than mere curiosity fueled her impatience. How long had it been since last she spoke with anyone she considered a friend? The other ministers and Travelers in Jispar’s court treated her as they would a child. Other women in the court had viewed her as a rival; now, she guessed, they pitied her, called her a fool. So many nights she had lain in her bed, longing for the simple pleasure of companionship, much less the luxury of a confidant. Vahn. The Tirribin, Droë. And, yes, Cresten. She had missed them all. Too much to have to endure this pointless squandering of valuable time. Who knew how long Cresten would be here before he had to Span back to his court?

After three songs, she was ready to tear out her hair. When the musicians started their

sixth, she had to bite her hand to keep from screaming her frustration.

After more than a bell of meaningless song and dance, Jispar rose, clapping his hands. Of course, every person in the hall followed his example.

“Splendid,” he said in his rich baritone. “A fine prelude to our banquet. We shall now make our way to the West Hall, where we shall share our bounty with our good friends from Milnos.”

He stepped off the dais and, as the gathered men and women parted to allow him through, made his way to the door.

The minister of protocol fell in step behind the king and to his right. Cresten, Lenna saw, followed but lagged.

She slipped through the crowd until she had nearly pulled even with him.

“Is it really you?” she whispered.

If he was surprised to find her so close, he gave no indication of it. “Wouldn’t the answer be the same no matter who I am?”

A breath of laughter escaped her.

“It’s good to see you again, Walker.”

Yes, caution called for formality. “And you, Spanner.” She hesitated. “I...I didn’t know you had been called to the court of Milnos. Congratulations.”

“Called is not really accurate. But that story can wait for another time. You don’t look well, Walker. Forgive me for saying so.”

That nearly broke her. Tears stung her eyes, threatening to pour over her cheeks.

“I’m well enough,” she said, her voice less steady than she would have liked.

He chanced a quick look her way. Facing forward again, he said, “The minister and I are to stay here for at least this one night. When might you and I speak in private?”

“After the banquet?”

Cresten shook his head. “We’ll be in negotiations for much of the day.”

“Tonight, then. There will be an evening meal when you’re done. I don’t know if His Majesty will expect the rest of his court to attend, but either way, we can speak after.”

“Very well,” he said. “I’ll look forward to that.”

He continued apace. She fell back a few strides. Upon reaching the West Hall, he joined the Milnosian minister near Jispar. Lenna took her place among the other ministers and Travelers.

She ate a bit of bread and slices of apple with honey, but felt too queasy to think of eating meats and cheeses and stews. She allowed herself a cup of watered wine. Conversations buzzed around her like flies in a stable, but she kept silent, and as surreptitiously as possible, watched Cresten.

She remembered him as quiet, watchful, and she saw the same qualities here in Jispar’s castle. He seemed intent on the king’s conversation with Milnos’s minister. When others in the Herjean court offered observations, he listened to them as well, attentive, solemn. On a few occasions, he inserted himself into the discussion. Jispar appeared to think Cresten’s contributions sound.

Not surprising, really. He had always been smart. Still, she saw in him other attributes she hadn’t noticed in Windhome. She remembered him as timid, unsure of himself. The Spanner sitting with her king and the Milnosian minister, however, struck her as poised and confident.

She had to admit that she found this new Cresten compelling.

Not Cresten. Not here, not right now. What name had he used, and why?

Did the minister know his real name? Was this a deception designed for this visit to Herjes? In which case, did she owe it to her king to reveal the truth?

Or had Cresten taken on an alias before ever reaching Milnos? Was that how he had gained a position in the court?

Again, her curiosity threatened to overmaster her judgment. She wanted to claim him from the table, drag him from the hall, and demand that he tell her all. And she wanted as well to tell him her tale, dark though it was. She hadn't realized until now how much she had missed her friend.

At length, the king declared an end to the banquet and dismissed all those in attendance except his two guests and a few of his most trusted counselors: the ministers of protocol and arms, as well as his Seer.

Lenna retreated to her chamber.

As darkness fell, she approached the West Hall, only to be confronted by a pair of Herjean guards. The soldiers of Milnos stood nearby as well.

"Is there something you need, Walker?" asked the older of the two, a lanky, yellow-haired man with angular etchings around his eye.

"They're still negotiating?"

"They're still inside," he said. "Do you need to speak with His Majesty?"

"No, I..."

They both watched her, the older man with a colder mien.

“The Walker—from Milnos—he was a friend in Windhome. I wish to speak with him.”

Neither of the guards spoke.

“Perhaps tomorrow, then.” She hurried away without hearing their reply, feeling that she had done wrong. She couldn’t say how.

On her way back to her quarters, she passed one of the pages who served the ministerial corridors. She halted, called the girl’s name. The page approached her and bowed.

“The king is speaking with the minister and Spanner from Milnos,” she said. “I would like you to keep watch on the West Hall and let me know when their discussions have ended.”

“Yes, my lady.”

The page bowed. Lenna nodded to her and walked on.

Less than half a bell later, there came a knock on her door—the page informing her that the king’s audience with his guests had ended, and the two emissaries from Milnos had gone to their quarters.

A problem, that. Lenna couldn’t request the location of Cresten’s chamber without raising suspicions. She thanked the girl, gave her a few treys, and closed her door once more.

She barely had time to cross back to her hearth when another knock drew her gaze.

“Who is it?” she called approaching the door again.

“A friend.”

Lenna smiled. Opened the door.

Cresten stood in the corridor, torch fire flickering in his eyes. This close he struck her as taller, broader. “Your king kept us later than I had hoped. Would you prefer I found you in the

morning?”

“No, this is fine.”

“The moon is up. Shall we walk? I’ve seen little of your castle.”

Not at all the Cresten she remembered.

“Yes, all right.”

She retrieved a cloak from her wardrobe and led him through the hallways and down into the gardens. The air had chilled, and high haze wreathed a gibbous moon. Lenna pulled the cloak tight around her shoulders and exhaled, vapor billowing before her.

Cresten spoke lightly of the day’s discussions, of the two Spans he was commanded to undertake back to Milnos so that he might confer with his king. Somehow the boy she had known, the one sent forever from Windhome Palace, had managed to place himself at the center of his isle’s affairs, and those of Herjes as well.

“What happened to you?” she asked. “How did you find your way to a court?”

He smiled, eyes trained on the stone path in front of them. “That’s a long story.”

“A good one, I hope.”

Cresten cast a look her way. “Yes, a good one.”

He began his tale with the day he left the Travelers’ Palace, the last time Lenna saw him before this morning. He spoke of *gaaz* cutting and smugglers, the Tirribin Droë and an innkeeper who took him in and befriended him, and finally of surviving a battle with armed criminals and discovering a gem that had been stolen from Milnos.

“By that time, I had taught myself to Span,” he said, “and I remembered that Wink was called to the court in Caszuvaar. I hoped that by returning the gem to the king there, I might earn

a position in his court.”

“That was clever,” she said, stealing another glance at him. He was beautiful. How had she not known this?

“Thank you.”

“Why are you not using your real name?”

He faltered mid-step, quickly scanned the courtyard. “The smugglers. They knew me as Cresten Padkar, and they knew that Quinn was dead. I used his name to get to Milnos, and Wink introduced me to her king that way. At the time, it seemed like a good idea. I’m not sure it’s necessary anymore, but I’m also not sure I can change back to being Cresten.” He shrugged.

“And I sort of like it now.”

“So you call yourself Quinn?”

“Quinnel. Quinnel Orzili.”

She halted, considered him. “I’ll need some time to get used to that.”

He smiled. They walked on.

“What about you?” he said. “What is it like serving the king of Herjes?”

Her turn to stumble. Her heart, which had been dancing only an instant before, now seized like a fist.

“Lenna?”

Tears spilled down her cheeks. She spun away from him, took a step, fully intending to bolt back to her chamber.

“Please!”

She halted, her body poised to flee.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

A harsh laugh escaped her. “Offend me. Is that what you think?”

“I don’t know what to think. I only know that I upset you. That wasn’t—”

She raised a hand, silencing him. Yes, she had longed for a friend, was desperate for someone—anyone—with whom she could unburden herself. Now that the moment was here, though, she couldn’t bring herself to reveal her humiliation. She swiped at her tears and made herself face him, a smile pasted on her lips.

“Forgive me,” she said. “I’ve... Sometimes I miss the palace and Windhome. That’s all. My emotions are... I’m fine.”

He didn’t answer. They had been close not so long ago. It felt as distant as another lifetime, but it was less than two years. Apparently he still knew her. Too well to be fooled by her denials. He stared at her, waiting.

Her chin quivered. Fresh tears ran down her face. When would she have this chance again? When would another friend come to these shores?

“I’m carrying his child,” she whispered. “He...he rapes me.”

Cresten looked stricken. “Oh, Lenna.” He took a step toward her.

“Don’t. Please.”

He stopped, nodded.

She took a long, hiccupping breath. She felt better for having spoken the words. She glanced around, as he had earlier, and at her gesture, they resumed their walk.

“I hate him,” she said, still in a whisper. “More than I’ve ever hated anyone or anything. I even—” She stopped herself before she could give voice to her desire to kill the king. She

couldn't share that, not even alone with this man, far from others. "I've even thought about killing myself," she said instead, because it was also true. "Just to spite him."

"Can't you leave this place?"

"You know how commerce with Windhome works, how it is for Walkers and Spanners and Crossers. The palace paid for me when I was young. They paid my parents. They sheltered me, and fed me, and raised me to be a Walker in a royal court. And then, once I'd been trained, Jispar paid them for me. A lot I would imagine, since I'm a Walker. He may not own me, but...well, he does own me in a way."

Cresten stared straight ahead, the muscles in his jaw rigid, his fist clenched. "What he's done to you... He signed a contract with the palace, and he has abrogated that contract."

"Do you know that?"

He didn't answer right away. "The contracts say that Walkers and other Travelers can't be forced to do certain things—"

"Those clauses are about our talents. Jispar can't make me Walk back ten years. I doubt there's anything in the contract about...about this."

"If the chancellor knew—"

"How would I tell him? Don't you think Jispar has all of my messages read? Not only mine—everyone's."

"I could tell the chancellor. I could go there and speak to him in person."

She shook her head. "No. Thank you, but... That would be humiliating. It would be worse even than taking my own life."

At first he didn't answer. Then he asked, "Why should *you* die?" in a voice almost too

soft for Lenna to hear.

A shiver went through her. They walked some distance in silence, their steps like the ticking of a clock. “I’ve asked myself the same question,” she admitted.

They shared a glance, their eyes locking for a fivecount.

“I can help you with this,” he said, his voice low, calm.

“Cresten—”

“That’s not my name anymore. I can help with this, Lenna. I’ve...I’ve taken lives. I’d wager you haven’t. I can help you. You shouldn’t make the attempt alone.”

“Have you ever killed a king?”

He actually grinned. “No, that I haven’t done.” He sobered. “But he’s a man first. A sword will kill him. So will a pistol, or a knife.”

His composure both reassured her and chilled her.

“How many men have you killed?”

“That’s not—”

“Tell me.”

He drew a breath. “Three. And I let Droë kill another for me. His death is on my head as well.”

“And you killed them—”

“Because they would have killed me. I give you my word.”

“My king wouldn’t kill you. Clearly you’re willing to murder for other reasons.”

He halted again, forcing her to do the same. “I’m willing to murder for you.”

Lenna held his gaze, despite being frightened by what she saw there. “Why?”

He hesitated. For the first time since their conversation began, she sensed that he was disconcerted.

“You’re my friend,” he said.

“Do you kill for all your friends?”

Another laugh escaped him. “No. That’s a service I’m offering only to you.”

“Then, I’ll ask you again. Why?”

His grin faded. “Fine. Because I love you. I have for a very long time, and I never stopped, even after Droë embarrassed us, even after Tache died, even after I was sent from the palace.”

He was more handsome than she remembered, more mature than he had any right to be at their age, more daring than she was herself. And, she realized, he was still the best friend she’d ever had. She needed to be honest with him.

“You know that I don’t love you. It’s not that I can’t, or that I won’t eventually. I’m not certain about any of that. I just know that I don’t love you now, and that I won’t be able to while...while he lives.”

“I understand.”

“We could both be killed.”

“I understand that as well. But we won’t be. We’re Windhome-trained, and I’ve learned to trust that training and my own instincts. We can do this.”

Before she could answer, he said, “There’s a guard approaching.” His voice had dropped further, so that he barely breathed the words. “From the direction we came. Don’t act alarmed, don’t startle.”

She heard nothing and was about to say so when she caught the faint jangle of a soldier's belt. A fivecount later, a man stepped into the small courtyard in which they stood, his boots scraping on stone. He bowed.

"Forgive me, my lady, my lord. The king wishes a word."

"With me?" Lenna asked.

"With both of you."

Lenna shot a glance at Cresten. He kept his eyes on the guard.

"Very well," he said, with a convincing smile. "Lead the way."

The man pivoted and started back toward the castle. Lenna and Cresten followed two paces behind. They walked in silence for a short while, before Cresten—no, Quinnel—said, "You were telling me about these gardens. Please go on."

Clever.

Lenna launched into a soliloquy on the history of the castle grounds. She tried to remember all that Jispar had told her that first day. When she couldn't remember something, she asked the soldier, drawing a subtle nod of approval from Cr—Quinnel.

All the while, her heart drummed in her chest and her breathing shallowed. At one point, with the guard still facing ahead, Cresten gave her hand a quick squeeze.

Quinnel! *Damn.*

Before long, they neared the twin doors of the king's hall. Torches lit the pearl eyes of the serpent carved into the wood. To Lenna's surprise, they passed by these doors and continued to Jispar's private quarters. Outside that door, they were made to wait in the corridor while a second guard informed the king of their arrival.

Cresten said nothing, kept his gaze trained on the floor. Lenna followed his example. Soon enough, the door opened, and the second guard bade them enter.

They stepped into the chamber and bowed in unison.

Jispar stood at a small table before the hearth, filling a goblet with red wine. He looked up as they straightened, smiled a greeting. He wore breeches and a silk shirt. A sword hung from his belt, but otherwise he was unadorned. Nevertheless, he filled the chamber, candles and the blaze behind him casting hulking shadows around the space. For all the changes Lenna saw in her friend, he appeared slight beside the king.

“Thank you for joining me,” Jispar said. He stepped around the table bearing two goblets. He handed one to Lenna and one to...to Quinnel. Then he claimed his own, took a chair by the fire, and waved them to two chairs that had been set opposite his own.

“You honor us, Your Majesty,” Quinnel said, lowering himself into his chair.

Lenna sat as well, raised her cup in salute of the king, but held her tongue.

“Will Minister Kraetas be joining us?” Quinnel asked.

The king shook his head. “This is not a matter of trade. This is a social occasion.” He smiled again.

“Then you honor me doubly, Your Majesty.”

“I believe my Walker has seen to that.”

Lenna tensed. Quinnel merely canted his head.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, Your Majesty. Lenna and I are friends from Windhome. Before today we hadn’t seen each other for the better part of two years. We were merely resuming an old acquaintance, reminiscing about our time together in the Travelers’ Palace. And

she was kind enough to give me a tour of your impressive gardens.”

“You make it sound quite innocent. Spanner...?”

“Orzili, Your Majesty. Quinnel Orzili. And it was innocent, I assure you.”

“Yes, of course. Forgive me, Spanner Orzili.” Jispar sipped his wine. “But really: innocent? In the light of that lovely moon, alone in the gardens?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Innocent. Still, I thank you.”

Jispar frowned. “For what?”

“For flattering me that I should be deemed a rival by one such as you. Again, you honor me.”

A dangerous game to play with a man like Jispar. Lenna hoped he knew what he was doing. She gulped a bit of wine to mask her fear.

The king appraised Quinnel, faint amusement curving his lips and winking the snake around his eye. “Tell me, how many Spanners does Arlis have in his court now? There’s you, of course...”

“And two others, Your Majesty. One is another friend of ours from Windhome: Fesha Wenikai. The other—”

“Yes, thank you. How long have you served him?”

“Less than a year, Your Majesty.”

“I see. And you came to his court the usual way?”

“No, I didn’t. I was forced to leave Windhome. I trained myself as a Spanner and, when the time came, sought employment in His Majesty’s court.”

“You trained yourself?”

“That’s right.”

“And why did you have to leave Windhome’s palace?”

“I’d rather not say.”

Lenna had raised her goblet to her lips again, but she lowered it now without drinking. She nearly spoke Cresten’s name aloud but stopped herself in time.

No one refused Jispar in his court.

“You would rather not,” the king repeated, his tone velvet.

“It was a tragedy. I don’t like to speak of it.”

It occurred to Lenna that Quinnel had yet to take a sip of his wine. Did he suspect poison?

“Of course,” the king said. “And yet, I have asked you a direct question.” He gestured, a sweep of his hand that encompassed the entire castle. “Within these walls, in this chamber, while you are drinking my wine and presuming to have private conversations with my Walker, my word is law.”

“Of course, Your Majesty. A boy I knew died.”

“You killed him?”

“No, he was killed by a time demon—a tragedy I might have prevented had I been smarter and stronger.”

“You knew of this?” Jispar asked Lenna.

“I was there,” she said. “The Tirribin and I were conversing, as we often did. The boy in question was a lout and a bore. He gave offense, and before we could stop her, the Tirribin attacked him.”

“Why did blame fall on you?” Jispar asked, facing Quinnel again.

When he didn’t answer right away, the king shifted his gaze back to Lenna. “Why was he blamed and not you?”

She gave a thin smile, remembering that day: the fraught discussions in Chancellor Samorij’s chamber, and also Cresten’s prescience. He’d seen it all, known exactly how it would happen. *You’ll be all right*, he’d told her. *You’re a Walker. They can’t make you leave. I won’t be here tomorrow. I’m expendable. They have no reason to think I’m anything special. I’m a Spanner, and not a particularly good one...*

Out of all he said that morning, only this last proved wrong. He was more than all of them had known at the time.

“He was blamed,” she said, “because I’m a Walker, and they couldn’t afford to blame me. Windhome had many Spanners, and still does. I was the only Walker.”

“Why haven’t you told me this before?”

Yes, why didn’t it come up one of those nights when you were brutalizing me?

“I didn’t think it important, my liege.” She heard the edge in her own words, was surprised by it.

Perhaps Jispar was as well. He didn’t challenge her.

“Well, this is all most interesting,” the king said. “Though I’m no less confused as to how you came to be in Arlis’s court.”

“I promise you, Your Majesty,” Quinnel said, unruffled, “there is no more to the story than I’ve told you. I trained myself, went to Milnos, and offered the king my services. Is it so surprising that His Majesty should welcome a Traveler to his court without having to pay any fee

to Windhome?”

Jispar’s frown returned, as if he were bothered by the clarity of Quinnel’s reasoning. “No, I suppose not.”

The king drained his cup. Lenna sipped from hers. Quinnel shifted his from one hand to the other, but to her knowledge had still not lifted the cup to his mouth.

Silence stretched among them, until, at last, the king stood. “It’s been a long day,” he said. “And you and your minister of protocol begin a long voyage in the morning.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Quinnel set his cup on the table and bowed to Jispar.

Lenna bowed as well.

“Walker, you will remain.”

Her pulse stammered, but she nodded.

Jispar escorted Quinnel to the door. “Goodnight, Spanner. This has been a most illuminating conversation. I regret that we won’t have more time.”

“You’re kind, Your Majesty. I hope we’ll have occasion to speak again before long. As you know, a Spanner is never too far from anywhere.”

He flashed a smile, darted a look at Lenna, and left.