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TAMORA PIERCE

EMPEROR MAGE

'Tamora Pierce is a pillar,
an icon, and an inspiration'
Sarah J. Maas



BOOK 3 OF THE IMMORTALS QUARTET

Tamora Pierce
Emperor Mage

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Wildness is a kind of magicDiscover a land of enchantment, legend, and adventure in this third book of The Immortals series, featuring an updated package – perfect for longtime fans and newcomers alike.Daine Sarrasri’s power is growing, and her bond with animals is ever stronger.Along with her mentor, Numair, and a delegation from Tortall, Daine is sent to the Emperor Mage of Carthak in hopes that she can help to smooth international relations between their lands before discord bubbles over into war – by helping the emperor’s ailing birds.But Carthak’s emperor Ozorne is charmingly treacherous, and Carthak itself built on the labour and suffering of slaves. No matter her choices, Daine finds herself at the centre of a terrible crossroads: she cannot turn away from animals in need, but to help this man could place those she loves in the greatest danger and make a mockery of all she values.All the while, her magic is flourishing, leading her to answers and abilities beyond what she ever could have dreamed ... but also to incredible danger.Discover a land of enchantment, legend, and adventure in this third book of The Immortals series, featuring an updated cover for longtime fans and newcomers alike.

Содержание

	6
Copyright	7
PRAISE FOR TAMORA PIERCE	8
Dedication	9
Map	10
CHAPTER 1	11
CHAPTER 2	21
CHAPTER 3	30
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	36

TAMORA PIERCE EMPEROR MAGE

BOOK 3 OF THE IMMORTALS QUART



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PRAISE FOR TAMORA PIERCE

‘Tamora Pierce didn’t just blaze a trail. Her heroines cut a swathe through the fantasy world with wit, strength, and savvy. Pierce is the real lioness, and we’re all just running to keep pace.’

LEIGH BARDUGO, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

‘Tamora Pierce creates epic worlds populated by girls and women of bravery, heart, and strength. Her work inspired a generation of writers and continues to inspire us.’

HOLLY BLACK, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

‘Tamora Pierce’s books shaped me not only as a young writer but also as a young woman. Her complex, unforgettable heroines and vibrant, intricate worlds blazed a trail for young adult fantasy – and I get to write what I love today because of the path she forged throughout her career. She is a pillar, an icon, and an inspiration.’

SARAH J. MAAS, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

‘I take more comfort from and as great pleasure in Tamora Pierce’s Tortall novels as I do from Game of Thrones.’

Washington Post

‘Tamora Pierce and her brilliant heroines didn’t just break down barriers; they smashed them with magical fire.’

KATHERINE ARDEN, author of *The Bear and the Nightingale*

Dedication

To those who took a struggling young writer, cushioned her in her early months in the Big Apple, and agreed that no idea was too crazy:

Ellen Harris-Brooker

P. J. Snyder

Craig Tenney

and

Robert Wehe

How could I forget?

I couldn't have done it

without you!

[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Praise for Tamora Pierce](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Map](#)

[Chapter 1: Guests in Carthak](#)

[Chapter 2: Imperial Welcome](#)

[Chapter 3: Hall of Bones](#)

[Chapter 4: Strange Conversations](#)

[Chapter 5: Palace Tour](#)

[Chapter 6: Carthaki Magecraft](#)

[Chapter 7: Waking Dreams](#)

[Chapter 8: The Badger Returns](#)

[Chapter 9: Daine Loses Her Temper](#)

[Chapter 10: Steel Feather](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

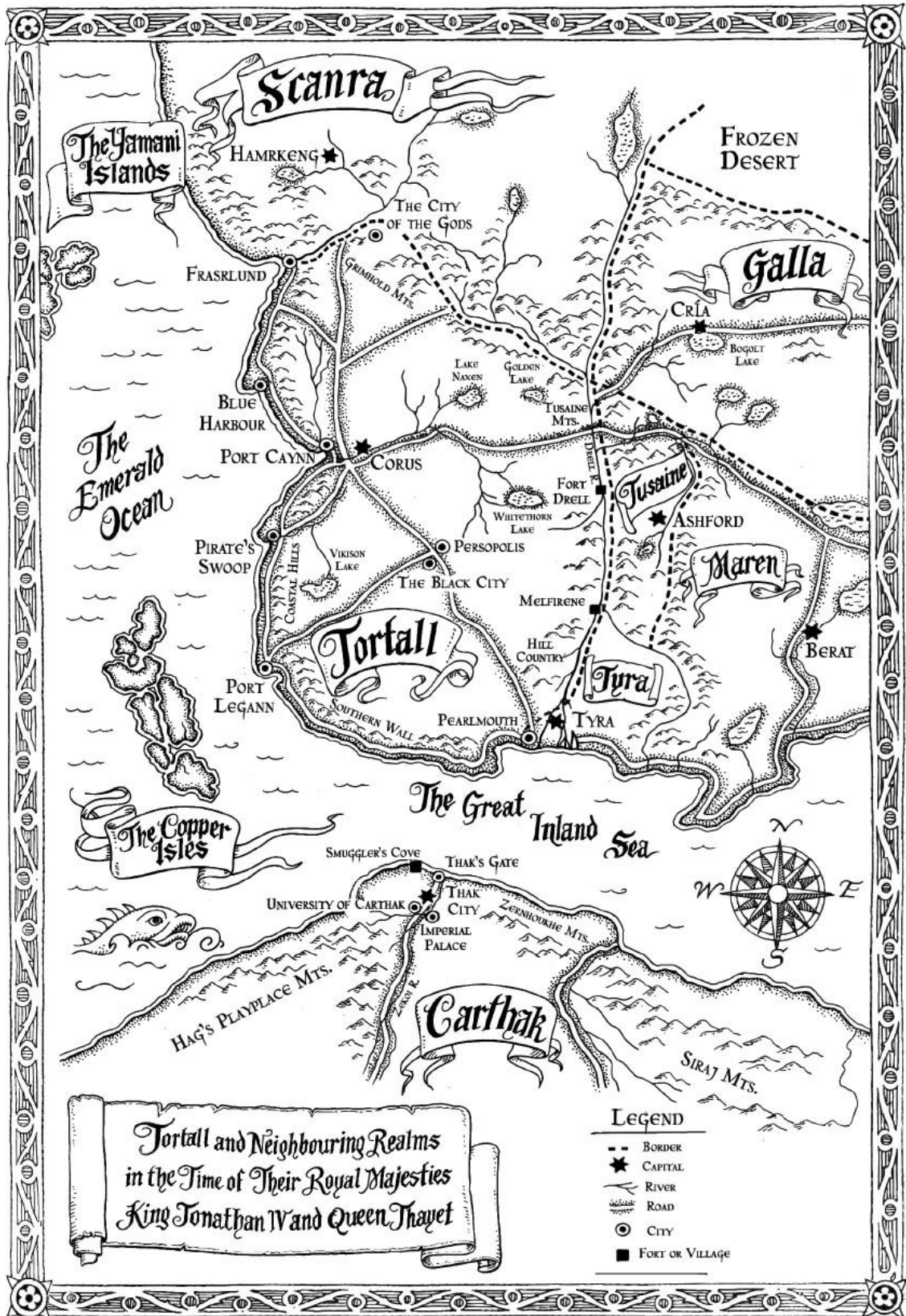
[Acknowledgements](#)

[Read on for a preview of *The Realms of the Gods: Book Four of the Immortals Quartet*](#)

[Also by Tamora Pierce](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Map



CHAPTER 1

GUESTS IN CARTHAK

His Royal Highness Kaddar, prince of Siraj, duke of Yamut, count of Amar, first lord of the Imperium, heir apparent to His Most Serene Majesty Emperor Ozorne of Carthak, fanned himself and wished the Tortallans would dock. He had been waiting aboard the imperial galley since noon, wearing the panoply of his office as the day, hot for autumn, grew hotter. He shot a glare at the nobles and academics on hand to welcome the visitors: they could relax under the awnings. Imperial dignity kept him in this unshaded chair, where a gold surface collected the sun to throw it back into his eyes.

Looking about, the prince saw the captain, leaning on the rail, scowl and make the Sign against evil on his chest. A stinging fly chose that moment to land on Kaddar's arm. He yelped, swatted the fly, got to his feet, and removed the crown. 'Enough of this. Bring me something to drink,' he ordered the slaves. 'Something *cold*.'

He went to the captain, trying not to wince as too-long-inactive legs tingled. 'What on earth are you staring at?'

'Tired of broiling, Your Highness?' The man spoke without looking away from the commercial harbour outside the breakwater enclosing the imperial docks. He could speak to Kaddar with less formality than most, since he had taught the prince all that young man knew of boats and sailing.

'Very funny. What has you making the Sign?'

The captain handed the prince his spyglass. 'See for yourself, Highness.'

Kaddar looked through the glass. All around the waterfront, birds made use of every visible perch. On masts, ledges, gutters, and ropes they sat, watching the harbour. He found pelicans, birds of prey – on the highest, loneliest perches – songbirds, the grey-and-brown sparrows that lived in the city. Even ship rails sported a variety of feathered creatures. Eerily, that vast collection was silent. They stared at the harbour without uttering a sound.

'It ain't just birds, Prince,' the captain remarked. 'Lookit the docks.'

Kaddar spied dogs and cats, under apparent truce, on every inch of space available. Not all were scruffy alley mongrels or mangy harbour cats. He saw the flash of bright ribbons, even gold- and gem-encrusted collars. Cur or alley cat, noble pet or working rat catcher, they sat without a sound, eyes on the harbour. Looking down, Kaddar found something else: the pilings under the docks swarmed with rats. Everywhere – warehouse, wharf, ship – human movement had stopped. No one cared to disturb that silent, attentive gathering of beasts. Hands shaking, the prince returned the glass and made the Sign against evil on his own chest.

'You know what it is?' asked the captain.

'I've never seen – wait. Could it be—?' Kaddar frowned. 'There's a girl, coming with the Tortallans. It's said she has a magic bond with animals, that she can even take on animal shape.'

'That's nothin' new,' remarked the captain. 'There's mages that do it all the time.'

'Not like this one, apparently. And she heals animals. They heard my uncle's birds are ill—'

'The *world* knows them birds are ill,' muttered the captain. 'He can lose a battalion of soldiers in the Yamani Isles and never twitch, but the gods help us if one of his precious birds is off its feed.'

Kaddar grimaced. 'True. Anyway, as a goodwill gesture, King Jonathan has sent this girl to heal Uncle's birds, if she can. And the university folk want to meet her dragon.'

'Dragon! How old *is* this lass anyway?'

'Fifteen. That's why *I'm* out here broiling, instead of my uncle's ministers. He wants me to squire her about when she isn't healing birds or talking to scholars. She'll probably want to visit all the tourist places and gawp at the sights. And Mithros only knows what her table manners are like. She's some commoner from the far north, it's said. I'll be lucky if she knows which fork to use.'

‘Oh, that won’t be a problem,’ said the captain, straight-faced. ‘I understand these northerners eat with their hands.’

‘So nice to have friends aboard,’ replied the prince tartly.

The captain surveyed the docks through his glass. ‘A power over animals, *and* a dragon ... If I was you, Highness, I’d dust off my map of the tourist places and let her eat any way she wants.’

At that moment the girl they discussed inched over as far on the bunk as she could, to give the man beside her a bit more room. The dragon in her lap squeaked in protest, but wound her small body into a tighter ball.

The man they were making room for, the mage known as Numair Salmalín, saw their efforts and smiled. ‘Thank you, Daine. And you, Kitten.’

‘It’s only for a bit,’ the girl, Daine, said encouragingly.

‘If we don’t wrap this up soon, *I* will be only a “bit”,’ com-plained the redheaded woman on Numair’s other side. Alanna the Lioness, the King’s Champion, was used to larger meeting places.

At last every member of the Tortallan delegation was crammed into the small shipboard cabin. Magical fire, a sign of shields meant to keep anything said in that room from being overheard, filled the corners and framed the door and portholes.

‘No one can listen to us, magically or physically?’ asked Duke Gareth of Naxen, head of the delegation. A tall, thin, older man, he sat on the room’s only chair, hands crossed over his cane.

The mages there nodded. ‘It’s as safe as our power can make it, Your Grace,’ replied Numair.

Duke Gareth smiled. ‘Then we are safe indeed.’ Looking in turn at everyone, from his son, Gareth the Younger, to Lord Martin of Meron, and from Daine to the clerks, he said, ‘Let me remind all of you one last time: *be very careful* regarding your actions while we are here. Do *nothing* to jeopardize our mission. The emperor is willing to make peace, but that peace is in no manner secure. If negotiations fall through due to an error on our parts, the other Eastern Lands will not support us. We will be on our own, and Carthak will be on *us*.

‘We *need* this peace. We cannot match the imperial armies and navy, any more than we can match imperial wealth. In a fight on Tortallan soil, we *might* prevail, but war of any kind would be long and costly, in terms of lives and in terms of resources.’

Alanna frowned. ‘Do we have to bow and scrape and tug our forelocks then, sir? We don’t want to seem weak to these southerners, do we?’

The duke shook his head. ‘No, but neither should we take risks – particularly not you.’

The Champion, whose temper was famous, blushed crimson and held her tongue.

To the others Duke Gareth said, ‘Go nowhere we are forbidden to go. Do not speak of freedom to the slaves. However we may dislike the practice, it would be unwise to show that dislike publicly. Accept no gifts, boxes, or paper from *anyone* unless they come with the knowledge of the emperor. *Offer* no gifts or pieces of paper to anyone. I understand it is the custom of the palace mages to scatter listening-spells through the buildings and grounds. Watch what you say. If a problem arises, let my son, or Lord Martin, or Master Numair know *at once*.’

‘Kitten will be able to detect listening-spells,’ remarked Numair. ‘I’m not saying she can’t be magicked, but most of the common sorceries won’t fool her.’

Kitten straightened herself on Daine’s lap and chirped. She always knew what was being said around her. A slim creature, she was two feet long from nose to hip, with a twelve-inch tail she used for balance and as an extra limb. Her large eyes were amber, set in a long and slender muzzle. Immature wings that would someday carry her in flight lay flat on her back. Silver claws marked her as an immortal, one of the many creatures from the Realms of the Gods.

Looking at the dragon, the duke smiled. When his eyes moved on to Daine, the smile was replaced with concern. ‘Daine, be careful. You’ll be on your own more than the rest of us, though it’s my hope that if you can help his birds, the emperor will let you be. Those birds are his only weakness, I think.’

‘You understand the rules?’ That was Lord Martin. He leaned around the duke to get a better look at Daine. ‘No childish pranks. Mind your manners, and do as you’re told.’

Kitten squawked, blue-gold scales bristling at the man’s tone.

‘Daine understands these things quite well.’ Numair rested a gentle hand on Kitten’s muzzle and slid his thumb under her chin, so she was unable to voice whistles of outrage. ‘I trust her judgement, and have done so on far more dangerous missions than this.’

‘We would not have brought her if we believed otherwise,’ said Duke Gareth. ‘Remember, Master Numair, you, too, must be careful. The emperor was extraordinarily gracious to grant a pardon to you, and to allow you to meet with scholars at the palace. Don’t forget the conditions of that pardon. If he catches you in wrongdoing, he will be able to arrest, try, even execute you, and we will be helpless to stop him.’

Numair smiled crookedly, long lashes veiling his brown eyes. ‘Believe me, Your Grace, I don’t plan to give Ozorne any excuse to rescind my pardon. I was in his dungeons once and see no reason to repeat the experience.’

The duke nodded. ‘Now, my friends – it is time we prepared to dock. I hope that Mithros will bless our company with the light of wisdom, and that the Goddess will grant us patience.’

‘So mote it be,’ murmured the others.

Daine waited for those closest to the door to file out, fiddling with the heavy silver claw that hung on a chain at her neck. Once the way outside was clear, she ran to the tiny room below decks that had been granted to her. Kitten stayed topside, fascinated by the docking preparations.

In her cabin, Daine shed her ordinary clothes, changing to garments suitable for meeting the emperor’s welcoming party. They wouldn’t see the emperor himself until that night – the palace lay three hours’ sail upriver – but it was still important to make a good impression on those sent to welcome them.

First came the grey silk shirt with bloused sleeves. Carefully she tucked her claw underneath, then slid into blue linen breeches. She checked the mirror to fasten silver buttons that closed the embroidered neck band high on her throat. Over all this splendour (as she privately thought of it) went a blue linen dress tunic. It was hard to believe that back home the leaves were turning colour. Here it was warm still, warm enough that the palace seamstresses had kept to summer cloth while making her clothes for the journey.

A few rapid brush strokes put her curls in order, and a pale blue ribbon kept them out of her face. Carefully she put sapphire drops, Numair’s Midwinter gift, in her earlobes and sat on the bunk to pull on her highly polished boots.

From a hole in the corner emerged the ship’s boss rat. He balanced on his hindquarters there, his nose twitching. So you’re off? he asked. Good. Now my boat will get back to normal.

‘Don’t celebrate yet,’ she advised. ‘I’ll come back soon.’

What a disappointment, he retorted. When do I get to see the last of you for good?

Silver light filled the cabin; a heavy, musky smell drifted in the air. When the light, if not the smell, faded, a badger sat on the bunk where Kitten slept. —*Begone, pest*— he ordered.

The rat was brave in the way of his kind, but the smell of *this* friend of Daine’s sent the rodent into his hole. He had not known Daine was on visiting terms with the badger god.

Daine smiled at the first owner of her silver claw. ‘You look well. How long’s it been?’

The badger was not in the least interested in polite conversation. —*Why are you here?*— he demanded harshly. —*What possessed you to leave your home sett? You are a creature of pine and chestnut forests, and cold lakes. This hot, swampy land is no country for you! Why are you here?*—

Daine made a face. ‘I’ll tell you, if you’ll stop growling at me.’ She sat on the bunk opposite him, and explained what the Tortallans in general, and she in particular, were doing this far south.

The badger listened, growling softly to himself. —*Peace? I thought you humans were convinced Emperor Ozorne was the one who tore holes in the barriers between the Human Realms and the Realms of the Gods, to loose a plague of immortals on you.*—

Daine shrugged. *He* says it wasn't him or his mages who did that. Renegades at the imperial university stole the unlocking-spells. They were caught and tried last spring, and executed.'

The badger snorted.

'Well, no one can prove if it's the truth or not. And the king says we need peace with Carthak more than we need to get revenge.'

—*No one needs to talk peace or any other thing here. This is the worst possible place you can be now. You have no idea ... Turn around and go home. Convince your friends to leave.*—

'I can't, and we can't!' she protested. 'Weren't you listening? The emperor knows I'm coming to look at his birds. If I go home now, when he expects me – think of the insult to him! And it's not the birds' fault they live here, is it?'

With no room for him to pace, he was forced to settle for shifting his bulk from one side to the other as he muttered to himself. —*I must talk them out of it, that's all. When they know, even they will have to understand the situation. It's not like a mortal girl has the freedom they do, after all.*—

'Who will understand?' Daine asked, intensely curious. In all the time she had known him, she had never seen him so uncertain, or so jittery. Like all badgers, he had rages, and would knock her top over teakettle if she vexed him; but that was very different from the way he acted now. 'And what's going on here? Can't you tell me?'

—*It's the Great Gods, the ones two-leggers worship,*— the badger replied. —*They have lost patience with the emperor, perhaps with this entire realm. Things could get very – chancy – here soon. You are sure you cannot make your friends turn back?*—

Daine shook her head.

—*No, of course not. You said it was impossible, and you never mislead me.*— Suddenly he cocked his head upwards, as if listening to something, or someone. He growled, hackles rising, and snapped at the air. Then – slowly – he relaxed, and nodded. —*As you wish.*—

'As who wishes?' asked Daine.

He looked at her, an odd light in his eyes. —*Come here, Daine.*—

'What?' she asked, even as she obeyed.

—*I have a gift for you. Something to help you if all goes ill.*—

His words made her edgy. 'Badger, I can't misbehave while I'm here. There's too much at stake. You ought to talk to Duke Gareth of Naxen. You know every time you teach me a lesson or give me a gift or anything, there's always an uncommon lot of ruction, and I've been told not to cause *any!*'

—*Enough! Kneel!*—

She had thought to refuse, but her knees bent, and she was face to face with him. Opening his jaws, the great animal breathed on her. His breath came out visible, a swirling fog that glowed bright silver. It wrapped around Daine's head, filling her nose, mouth, and eyes, trickling under her shirt, flowing down her arms. She gasped, and the mist ran deep into her throat and lungs. She could feel it throughout her body, expanding to fill her skin.

When her eyes cleared, he was gone.

Stunned and trembling, Daine got to her feet. What was all *that* about?

The door opened and Kitten entered. 'You just missed the badger,' Daine informed her.

Kitten, who had met the animal god before, whistled her disappointment.

'I'm sorry. He was being *very* strange, and he left in a hurry.' Worried both about what he had said, and about what he didn't say, she picked up Kitten and steadied her on one hip, then walked out on deck. When they reached the ship's rail, the animals awaiting her on the docks burst into an ear-piercing welcome. Dogs howled; birds cried out in their many languages. Only the cats welcomed

her quietly, purring as hard as they could. The girl listened with a smile. She was so lucky to have friends wherever she went!

Thank you for meeting me, she called silently, her magic carrying the words to her listeners. It is very kind, and I liked it so much! I hope I'll have a chance to get to know some of you while I'm here. For now, though, please stop calling, and go home. We're making the two-leggers nervous!

They knew she was right. Birds took flight by groups, careful not to bump into one another; dogs and cats left the docks. Only the rats stayed, their attitude of decided *unwelcome* a steady itch in her mind.

Piffle to you, she told them, and went to join Numair at the rail. He was dressed simply, but well, for their arrival. His soft, wavy black hair was tied in a short horsetail, accenting a long nose and full, sensitive mouth. A black silk robe that buttoned high on the throat billowed around his powerful frame. Long, wide sleeves covered his arms to the wrists; the hem stopped short of the toes of his boots. That robe was donned by only a handful of mages, the most powerful in the world. Not even the famed Emperor Mage was allowed to wear it. Numair always played it down. He said the learning needed to win the black robe was not worth much in the real world, but Daine knew better. Once, when Numair was pressed by an enemy sorcerer, she saw him turn the other man into a tree.

'Are you all right?' she asked, squinting up at him. The effort strained her neck: he was a foot taller than her five feet five inches. His dark eyes were emotionless as he watched the dock. Only his big hands, white-knuckled as they gripped the rail, showed tension. She had wanted to talk about the badger's visit, but she could see that this was not a good time. 'Is something wrong?'

'No, magelet,' he said, using his private name for her. 'And I am as well as may be expected. I can't say which prospect makes me more apprehensive – that of meeting old enemies, or old friends.' His voice was unusually sombre.

'Old enemies, surely?' She understood his concern. Carthak's great university had been his home for eleven years. Shortly before his twenty-first birthday he had fled, accused of treason against his best friend – the emperor. Now, almost thirty, he was, in a way, coming home.

'I don't know,' was his quiet reply. 'I was very different then. And you know what the wise men say – "Only birds can return to their old nests".' He shook his head, and smiled down at her, white teeth flashing against his swarthy face. 'Mithros bless. *You* look very pretty.'

Kitten chortled while Daine blushed. 'You think so really?' she asked, feeling shy. 'I know I don't hold a candle to Alanna, or the queen—'

He held up a hand. 'That isn't strictly accurate. The Lioness is one of my dearest friends, but she is *not* an exemplar of female beauty. Years and experience have given her charm, and her eyes are extraordinary, but she is not beautiful. Queen Thayet is astoundingly attractive, it's true, but you have your own – something.' He scrutinized her as she giggled. 'You should wear blue more often. It brings out matching shades in your eyes.'

'I heard that about *my* looks,' Lady Alanna said, joining them. 'I'll get you later.' Like Daine, she wore a tunic and breeches. Hers were violet silk trimmed with gold braid, over a white silk shirt. At her waist hung her sword. She grinned at Daine. 'You do look good.'

'Thanks,' Daine said, blushing once more. 'So do you.'

The others, clad in daytime finery, joined them now that the ship was about to dock. Under their conversation, Daine tugged Numair's sleeve. 'I need to talk to you as soon as you can manage,' she whispered as the sailors made the ship fast. 'It's really, really important.'

He nodded, but his eyes were on the ships around them. She couldn't be sure he'd even heard.

Across the harbour a gong crashed three times. The Carthakis on the docks knelt and touched their heads to the ground as slow, regular drumbeats sounded. A path had opened from their ship across the busy harbour to what appeared to be a canal lock. Down that path came a high-prowed boat rowed by shaved-headed slaves. Its gilded surfaces threw off painful flashes as it swept along.

Daine peered at the man seated on a throne-like chair on the deck. He wore a crown like a cap, one covered with diamonds, that glittered fiercely. ‘Who is *that*?’

Gareth the Younger said, ‘Probably a lesser prince, one of the imperial court.’

‘This prince isn’t a lesser one.’ Numair’s stage whisper carried to those behind him. ‘See the lapis lazuli rod in his left hand? That is an attribute of the heir – what’s his name?’

‘His nephew Kaddar,’ one of the others said. ‘Age sixteen. Studies at the university.’

The Tortallans got into the ship’s boat and were rowed to the galley, where a heavy ladder was dropped to them. Daine waited for the senior members of her party to board, then followed. Kitten lost patience with her slow progress up the ladder and scrambled past her, beating her onto the deck. Their order, as they gathered before the prince, was roughly that of importance, with Duke Gareth, Lord Martin, and Lady Alanna in front, Numair and the other officials behind them. Gareth the Younger, Daine, Kitten, and the Tortallan clerks kept to the back.

Someone called orders. A drummer sounded a beat. Sunburned and tanned backs on Daine’s left stretched forwards. The left bank of oars dipped; the boat began to turn.

Standing by the prince was a herald. He wore a gold robe cut like those Daine had already seen on other Carthakis, a knee-length tunic with short sleeves. Thumping his staff of office on the deck, he cried, ‘His Imperial Highness, Kaddar Gazanoi Iliniat, Head of House Khazoi, Prince of Siraj—’

Daine lost track of the rest. She was interested in the boat: once it had turned, both sets of oars rose and fell on drumbeats, and the vessel raced across the harbour. On either side of the deck the rowers sat at their benches. Each time they stretched forwards or pulled back, she heard a clatter under the drum’s thud and the men’s grunts of effort. It took her a moment to realize that it was the noise of the chain that linked their ankle cuffs.

Her skin prickled. She made herself look away and listen to the herald. ‘His Most Serene and Imperial Majesty, Ozorne Muhassin Tasikhe, Emperor of Carthak—’

Kitten went to the end of a bench, chirping and peering at the man seated there. The girl went after her. ‘I’m sorry,’ she told the man, who watched the dragon from the corner of his eye. ‘She doesn’t know not to interrupt when folk are working—’ The slave looked up at her, startled.

‘Eyes to your oar!’ snarled a voice nearby. A lash snaked out to flick the man on the cheek. The slave hardly blinked, though the whip had come dangerously close to his eye. Daine bit the inside of her cheek and went back to her place, hoisting Kitten onto her hip.

Someone passed a handkerchief to her as the herald began to name their company to the prince. She quickly wiped her eyes. By the time she was under control, Gareth the Younger and the dean of mages at the Tortallan royal university were bowing to the prince, who greeted them both with distant courtesy. They bowed again, and stepped to the side so that Daine and Kitten were revealed.

Awed, the girl saw that the odd shape of the prince’s eyes came from dark lines drawn on both lids and extended to his temples. He was a light-skinned black, with thin lips and long, thick eyelashes, dressed in a calf-length tunic of crimson silk. His jewels shimmered in the sun. He boasted three gold rings in his left ear, a gold bangle shaped like a many-flamed sun, and a ruby drop in the right. Another ruby served him as a nose button. He wore a collar-like necklace of gold inlaid with mother-of-pearl strips. Rings decorated fingers and thumbs; bracelets hung on both wrists. A flash drew her eyes to his feet, where she found rings on toes bared by his sandals. It occurred to her that she might not possess as much jewellery in her entire lifetime as the prince wore right now.

‘Veraldaine Sarrasri,’ the herald proclaimed. ‘The dragon Skysong.’

‘I greet you in the name of my august kinsman, the Emperor Mage of Carthak,’ the prince said formally. Then he leaned forwards, eyes sparkling with interest. ‘It’s a true dragon?’ His voice was light and fast. ‘Not a basilisk, which we’ve seen, but maybe a young basilisk—’

Kitten walked to the raised chair and rose, balancing on her hindquarters as she gazed at the young man. ‘She’s a true dragon, Your Highness,’ replied Daine. She saw intelligence in his eyes,

paint or no. ‘Basilisks have pebbled skin, almost like beading. Kit – her name’s Skysong, but mostly folk call her Kitten – she has scales. Her ma was the same.’

The prince frowned. ‘A mother? We were told there is only one dragon in the Mortal Realms.’

‘There is. Her ma was killed by—’ She almost said ‘Carthaki raiders,’ but stopped herself. As she had been told over and over, no one could *prove* they were Carthaki. ‘Pirates,’ she went on. ‘She gave birth to Kitten a week before she died, and I’ve been raising Kit ever since.’

‘Is it hard? What does she eat? Does she hunt live prey, or—’

The herald coughed. ‘Your Highness, the ambassadors have yet to greet the delegation.’

The prince looked like any of Daine’s Rider friends caught in a misstep. He made a noise that sounded like a sigh and eased back in his chair, holding the blue stone rod and gold fan crossed on his chest once more. ‘It is my hope that, should you have idle hours during your stay with us, you will permit me to show you some of Carthak’s wonders.’

Duke Gareth had told her such an offer would be made by a Carthaki noble, so Daine had an answer ready. She bowed. ‘I’d be honoured, Your Highness,’ she said, while thinking, He sounds *so* thrilled.

‘May I present you of Tortall to your colleagues and fellow ambassadors,’ intoned the herald, more as a command than a request. He led their group to the spot where men, some dressed like the prince, some in robes cut in the same fashion as Numair’s, waited under a canopy. Most of their names escaped Daine, at the rear of the Tortallan delegation. She would have to deal with almost none of these dignitaries, and saw no reason to memorize alien names and titles.

One, a mage, did make an impression. He was a different fish among so many black-, brown-, and olive-skinned southerners – a tall northerner, tan and weathered from sun and wind, with earnest blue eyes and silver streaks in his flyaway blond hair. He stood with lesser mages and nobles, wearing a scarlet robe with earth-brown cuffs and hem. He wore his robe unfastened, over a northern-style shirt and breeches made of undyed cotton. When the herald gave his name – Lindhall Reed – he and Numair embraced. Daine smiled. Ever since she had met Numair two years ago, she had heard much of his old teaching master.

‘Arram,’ Lindhall said, using Numair’s birth name, ‘welcome, if that is the proper word.’

Numair’s eyes were overbright. ‘I’m surprised you remembered our arrival,’ he replied, voice scratchy. ‘I thought I’d have to root you out of your workroom.’

‘No, no.’ Reed’s voice was quiet, cultured, and fast, as if he fought to breathe. ‘I have a good assistant, better than you were. She keeps track of everything. Unfortunately, she’s about to go and live with the merfolk and study their culture. I hear they’re moving in all along the Tortallan coast. I’d thought they’d live in rookeries, like sea lions, but their nature appears to be more tribal. And you are Arram’s student,’ he said without a break, looking at Daine. She jumped at the change of topic. ‘He wrote to me so much about you. He says you *know* how bats avoid objects and catch prey. When I was a student I incurred censure when I hypothesized that they do it with manipulation of sound, and Arram said you proved that to be true.’

Daine smiled up at this man, who was nearly as tall as Numair. ‘Well, yes. They squeak at things. Their ears move separately, to gather in what they hear, and each sound has a meaning—’

‘I don’t like to interrupt,’ Numair said apologetically, ‘but, Lindhall, I have questions that require answers. Forgive me, both of you.’

Lindhall looked wistfully at Daine. After friendship with Numair, she recognized someone who would rather talk about learning than anything else. ‘Duty calls,’ the older mage commented. ‘And I know we shall have other chances to confer, since you are here for the emperor’s birds, and I help him to care for them. Very well, Arram, I am yours, for the time being. Unless—’ His face brightened. ‘I know you’ve also had encounters with whales. It is true, their songs are communication, not merely noise? Or communication in the sense of birdcalls, proclaiming territory, and so forth? I—’

‘Lindhall,’ Numair said firmly, and dragged his old friend away.

I didn't even get to ask him what's wrong with the emperor's birds, Daine thought, and sighed. 'Daine,' called Alanna, 'can you spare Kitten? Duke Etiakret and Master Chioké would like a closer look at her, if she doesn't mind.'

Kitten whistled an enquiry to Daine, who smiled. 'Go on. They want to admire you.' Kitten, always open to admiration, galloped off.

Trying not to look at the slave rowers, Daine went to the prow of the boat, where she could see the riverbank. During the introductions, they had left the port city of Thak's Gate behind, following canals that led finally into the River Zekoi. As the oars tugged the barge south, the city on Daine's side of the boat gave up its claims to the riverbank.

An army replaced it. From here she saw barracks in long rows, taking up hundreds of acres. Companies of soldiers stood side by side on the riverbank, each soldier with a bright, rectangular shield on one arm, a spear in the opposite hand. Looking at them, she swallowed hard. She was no stranger to military camps. Since her arrival in Tortall she had visited home bases for the army and the Queen's Riders alike, but none of them were as big as this.

As the imperial vessel passed the first company of soldiers, Daine heard a shouted order. As one man, the soldiers banged their spears three times on their shields, then thrust the spears into the air with a roar. The second company followed suit, then the third, then the fourth. It seemed to go on forever, drowning out all conversation and making Daine's ears ring. Duke Gareth is right, she thought, feeling ill. Even if we could *beat* so many, what would be left afterwards?

The gods are up to something, she remembered abruptly. Something that might put a crimp in the style of this army. If only I could find out what's going to happen!

'That is just the Army of the North.' The prince joined her at the rail as they sailed past the last soldiers. 'My uncle has three other armies of identical size, all in combat readiness.'

It was hard to read his face, but he sounded as if he wasn't proud of the imperial forces. 'What's over here?' she asked, turning. They now had a good view of the far bank also. This side of the Zekoi was untamed. Reeds grew head-high; a web of streams emptied into the river. The loglike shapes on the far bank were not dead wood, she realized, but animals.

'Crocodiles.' The prince had seen what she looked at. 'Do you have them in the North?'

'No,' she replied, calling with her magic. They stirred, drunk with the sun. 'They're giant lizards, aren't they? I have a book that tells of them.' She called again, and felt a soft reply.

'*Giant, water-swimming, vicious* lizards,' replied the prince.

Daine counted to three, then said politely, 'There's few animals that're "vicious" by nature, if you'll forgive my saying so. Usually there's a good reason for them acting nasty – like you're stepping in their nests, or you're stealing their food.'

Food, agreed a low voice in her mind. Hungry, commented another. A third voice added, Waiting for food.

'Like all females, you are sentimental about animals,' the prince replied, his tone superior. 'If you had a croc after you in the water, you wouldn't be so quick to stand up for them.'

'They came after *you* personally?' She couldn't see this painted fellow doing anything that might wrinkle his clothes.

'Well, no, but everyone says they do.'

Someday I must read this scholar Everyone, she thought as she bit her tongue to keep from giving a rude answer. He seems to have written so much – all of it wrong.

She called to the crocodiles again. I'm Daine, she told the great creatures. I come from the North.

You are odd, replied the one who had spoken last. You smell of frozen water and too many trees. Do not scold that two-legger. If he enters our water, we will eat him gladly.

A private boat, brightly painted, floated by. A man in a low-backed chair read under a canopy; a slave chased a boy who ran with something that struggled in his arms. Cornering the child at the

rail, the slave tried to make him release his prize. The child leaned away. Suddenly he screeched. His arms flew open, and his captive tumbled into the water.

‘If you can’t hold on to pets, you don’t deserve to have any,’ scolded the slave. The child screamed as she dragged him away without another look at the animal in the river. The crocodiles did not share her disinterest. They slid into the water from their riverbank.

‘No, don’t!’ Daine cried to them aloud, forgetting her com-panion. ‘Let it be!’

Hungry, said a voice. Food is food.

It will die anyway, replied the one who spoke the most. Look at it.

The crocodile was right. The tiny creature, whatever it was, couldn’t swim. It fought to stay up, but the current dragged on its fur and limbs.

Stripping off her boots, Daine jumped over the rail and into the river. Swimming against the current, she struck out for the drowning animal. Please stop, she told the crocodiles silently. It isn’t more than a mouthful! One last pump of her arms, and she had reached the sufferer.

I hope you do not interfere in too many meals, remarked the talkative crocodile as the reptiles swam off. We do not have enough food as it is.

I’ll try not to, Daine promised. Treading water, she pumped liquid from the pet’s lungs. He gasped. ‘Shh,’ she said. ‘It’s all right. I’ve got you.’ He was a monkey, tiny enough to sit on her palm, with huge grey-green eyes. Around his neck was a jewelled collar. ‘No wonder you couldn’t swim.’ She unbuckled the thing and let it fall. ‘That was probably too heavy dry, let alone wet.’

Black, sparkling fire yanked them from the river and pulled them through the air. Daine soothed the frantic monkey until Numair’s magic deposited them on the deck of the imperial barge.

The Carthakis, from prince to slaves, gaped at her and her new friend. Kitten began to scold as Daine blushed. Muddy water formed a pool on the polished deck; her hair dripped. Her linen and silk were ruined. Someone – a female – giggled. A man snorted. Daine glanced at Duke Gareth and saw that he had covered his face with one hand as his son’s broad shoulders quivered with suppressed laughter. More than anything at the moment, she wished she had the power simply to vanish.

They went from their quarters to the women guests’ baths soon after their arrival, to Daine’s relief. Not only was she able to wash, but maids brought a basin and extra mild soap so that she could bathe her new friend. They even gave her towels for him. She dried him quickly there, then returned with him and Kitten to her room to do a more thorough job.

She used the work to get acquainted with this odd creature. Lindhall had called him a pygmy marmoset. Imported from the Copper Isles, he’d been the pet of the child he called the Monsterboy, the one who had let him fall into the river. His fur was strange – a mix of yellow, brown, grey, and olive green, which looked as if it might turn its wearer invisible in a proper forest. The marmoset gave his name, but it was in whistles and clucks, impossible for her to pronounce. She asked if he would mind if she called him Zekoi, or Zek, after the river she had taken him from. He seemed quite taken with that, even trying to pronounce it on his own.

Finished with Zek’s grooming, Daine got to her feet. ‘I need to change,’ she told the marmoset when he clung to her. ‘Hold on to Kitten.’ Zek eyed the dragon with misgiving. Kitten chirped, and offered her forepaw. He clutched it and watched Daine’s every movement.

Drawing on a shift, the girl surveyed her room. It was simple, elegant, and costly. Walls, floor, and ceiling were polished marble. Carved cedar window screens gave off their famous scent. The bed was delicately carved, the sheets fine cotton. Over it lay a silk eiderdown in autumn colours. The clean, sweet-scented privy lay off in a small dressing room. That chamber, a few feet from the bed, was furnished with a table and matching chair, a long mirror, and a number of tiny jars that held various cosmetics, salves, and perfumes.

There was but one feature she disliked – a tiger-skin rug. Its jaws were open in a snarl; yellow glass eyes glared at the world. ‘I have to ask them to move this,’ she told her audience. ‘I can’t sleep

with it here.' Kneeling, Daine touched it sadly. She had seen tigers in the king's menagerie. They were magnificent cats, and she preferred the ones whose skin was still attached.

Her palms felt hot, itchy. Suddenly they pulsed. White fire spilled from her hands onto the tiger. Slowly the eyelids fell, and rose again. The jaw relaxed; the great mouth closed.

She thrust herself away so quickly that she fell over. 'Did you *see* that?' she demanded of Kitten and Zek. 'What *was* it?' Both stared at her, plainly as bewildered as she was.

Although she waited, the skin did not move again. Using a long-handled brush, she shoved it under her bed, poking it repeatedly to keep any part from sticking out. At last it was securely tucked away, and she could dress.

CHAPTER 2

IMPERIAL WELCOME

Some hours later, Daine looked round the antechamber to the throne room with awe. Kitten did the same. The marmoset Zek, who had refused to stay behind, observed everything from his hiding place under her hair, at the back of her neck.

There was much to stare at. The room was filled with nobles and mages dressed in their finest. Shaved-headed slaves were everywhere, offering food, drinks, flower garlands, and feathered or jewelled fans. Huge screens had been pushed back to reveal a broad terrace and gardens. Light came from large globes hung by chains from the ceiling. As the sky darkened, the globes shone brighter.

‘How do the lamps keep burning?’ Daine asked.

‘Magic.’ The speaker was Harailt of Aili, dean of magical studies at the royal university in Tortall. He was a stocky, round-faced man with an endless supply of jokes. Stuck in his outer room, waiting to bow to the emperor, Daine had been grateful for each and every jest. ‘Numair, why didn’t you tell us about this light-spell?’ Harailt asked. ‘To have steady, strong illumination—’

Numair looked up. ‘They didn’t have it when I was here,’ he said absently. ‘They did something with glass balls, but they faded after a short time. These aren’t glass.’

‘The globes are filled with crystals,’ Lindhall Reed explained. ‘Remind me and I’ll have one of the craft mages explain it for you.’ Seeing the door to the emperor’s audience chamber open, he added, ‘You’ll be all right, Arra – I’m sorry – Numair?’

The younger mage smiled. ‘I have to be, don’t I?’ As a page beckoned their group forwards, he took a deep breath. ‘Here we go, into the presence of the one and only Emperor Mage. Huzza.’

The Tortallans entered the imperial audience chamber, Daine, Zek, and Kitten at the back of the company with the clerks. The admiring looks of that group of young men told Daine that not only had she been wise to wear this twilight-blue silk gown, but that she had done well to accept the royal gift of a wardrobe for this trip. ‘You go as a representative of the Crown, just like the ambassadors,’ Queen Thayet had said, hazel eyes smiling. ‘My lord and I insist. Trust me: there is nothing like a good appearance to give a woman confidence.’ The queen had been right. It was hard to feel insignificant in a gown that whispered as she moved and winked with silver embroidery.

Introduced by a herald, Duke Gareth gave his speech to the emperor, announcing their desire to meet Carthak halfway and their hopes for a lasting peace. He then presented gifts from the king and queen to the emperor. As he spoke, Daine studied the ruler of Carthak, who sat on a tall throne before them, flanked by his ministers and nobles.

She had never heard of him until two-and-a-half years ago, when she had come from Galla to Tortall after her mother’s death. Now she knew him all too well. Most Tortallans believed it was this emperor who had managed to break the walls between Mortal and Divine Realms on frequent occasions, turning loose the creatures known as immortals to prey upon Carthak’s enemies. Daine herself, working with Numair a year ago, had found evidence that Ozorne was helping to plan a rebellion against the rulers of Tortall. When the monarchs of the other Eastern Lands, those countries north of the Inland Sea, had learned of Emperor Ozorne’s plot against one of them, they had united. The threat of the entire northern continent going to war against the southern one had caused Emperor Ozorne to back down, and to open peace talks with Tortall.

Her first sight of the infamous Emperor Mage filled her with awe. She had thought the prince was fine, but he was a barnyard rooster to his uncle’s peacock. Gold frosted Ozorne’s hair; gold beads hung from a wealth of thin braids. Gold paint shimmered on lips, brows, even his eyelashes. Gold rings marched up the curve of each ear; a diamond hung from his left earlobe. His neck was ringed with six rows of deep-blue stones that sparked with many-coloured fires: black opals, expensive stones prized

because they could hold magical power. Beneath them he wore the calf-length, short-sleeved robe of his people in heavy gold brocade. Looped at his right hip and passing over his left shoulder was a crimson drape. The long end of the cloth was linked to the emperor's left wrist by a gold bracelet. Each finger sported a ring. His sandals were gilded. Like the prince, he wore toe rings, and added to them ankle bracelets.

She'd heard of Carthak's wealth and power, but it was one matter to hear such things, another to see one man decked out like an idol in gold and gems.

Duke Gareth had finished. Now the line of Tortallans started forwards as Duke Gareth gave their names, each bowing to the emperor as they were presented. Watching them, Daine felt a rush of pride. Carthak might be proud and great, but Tortall had sent wise and famous people to work out a peace settlement. Alanna the Lioness was a legend in the Eastern *and* Southern Lands, one the Carthakis couldn't match; and as far as Daine was concerned, Numair was the fish their hosts had allowed to get away.

At last her name and Kitten's were called. Taking a deep breath, Daine walked up to the first step of the dais on which the throne stood, and curtsied, spreading her blue skirts at her sides. The queen had worked on the movement with her for hours, and she was glad to do her teacher proud. Kitten walked up the steps, halting only when she reached the emperor's feet.

'Greetings, dragon child. This *is* a pleasure.' He reached down. Kitten sniffed his fingers, and sneezed. Grasping his hand with her forepaws, she examined the gems on his rings with interest. 'And you are her keeper?' enquired the emperor. 'The one who is also a healer of animals?'

She didn't like that word, *keeper*, but she nodded. Lord Martin cleared his throat, and she realized she was supposed to answer the ruler of Carthak. 'I take care of her, Your Imperial Majesty. And I have wild magic with animals of all kinds.'

'How was she taken, your dragon? A trap, or a pit? A net?'

Daine swallowed. Traps or snares for Kitten? 'I don't think you understand our relationship, Your Imperial Majesty. I'm not a keeper; I didn't take her. Kit's – Kitten's – ma died to protect my friends and me. She left Kitten to my care.'

'Indeed?' He looked at her with curious amber eyes. 'It is true, then. You are able to commune with the immortals.'

'The ones like animals, sire. The griffins, and winged horses. Dragons. The ones that are part human, no.' She made a face. 'They can communicate without my help.'

Kitten, bored with the conversation, voiced a whistle-croak. The gems on the emperor's fingers blazed with light.

'Amazing!' he cried, delighted. 'Has she always been able to do that?'

'No, sir. She learned a year ago, from a basilisk. She learns things fast.'

'Then she is blessed, as we are blessed to look upon her.' He nodded a dismissal, and Daine stepped back to join the others.

Introductions over, the emperor said, 'To you, representatives of our royal cousins Jonathan and Thayet, we say, welcome to Carthak. We pray that peace will reign between our lands and know that with such a distinguished company to smooth the way, peace is all but assured. And now, there is food outside, and drink, music, and good company. In your time among us, we have arranged for entertainment that we hope will arouse wonder and interest in our empire. Enjoy all these things, please. If you desire anything, only voice it to our servants. Within reason it shall be granted you.'

Dismissed from the imperial presence, the Tortallans bowed as they backed up, until they were outside again. Once they had left the area closest to the door of the audience chamber, a gong sounded and a grinding noise filled the air. Everyone, guests and servants, froze in place. Slowly the walls that cut the audience chamber off from the antechamber sank into the floor. Now the emperor's dais commanded a view of the combined rooms. Everyone bowed or curtsied deeply to the golden man

on the golden throne. He waved a hand; talk and movement picked up where they'd left off. A slave knelt beside the throne, offering a bowl of fruit. The emperor selected a fig, and nibbled it.

Daine felt like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Luckily niches in the walls held couches, with brightly coloured pillows to cushion those who wished to sit. She nearly fell into the closest one. Zek squeaked and left his place of concealment to climb into her lap. Duke Gareth and Numair sat beside her, and the remaining Tortallans gathered around.

'Are you all right?' Numair asked softly, cupping her cheek with one large hand. 'I had forgotten how intimidating he can be when he has all his imperialness on.'

The girl looked at the gilded figure on the dais. 'I noticed. Are *you* all right? Did he say anything to you?'

He smiled. 'No. If I'm lucky, he'll ignore me for the rest of our stay. That's how he always managed such things when we were boys, anyway. If someone bested him at anything, he just pretended that person didn't exist. He got to be very good at it.'

Duke Gareth remarked, 'It went quite well. You did us credit, Daine.'

The girl blushed and smiled at him. 'Thank you, Your Grace.'

Gareth the Younger and Harailt, who had quietly left them, returned with servants bearing trays of cups. 'Fruit juices,' the mage said as his companions helped themselves.

'So far, so good.' Lindhall had come with the servants. 'Numair, did he speak to you?'

'He didn't even look at me. He spoke the most with Daine.'

'But what about his birds?' the girl asked, confused. 'I came all this way to see them, and he didn't mention them at all.'

'Rulers don't act as other men,' Duke Gareth told her. 'All requirements of protocol must be met before personal considerations may intrude. You must be patient until he sends for you.'

'But more of them might get sick then,' she muttered. Numair looked at her and put a finger to his lips. Daine sighed, but obeyed the command to be quiet.

'*Arram*,' said a female voice. Everyone looked around. A blue-eyed blonde in an open mage's robe of cream-coloured silk approached, hands out. Her pretty face was artfully coloured with the contents of pots like those that were on Daine's dressing-room table. Under the robe was a northern-style dress of rose-petal pink, cut to accent a narrow waist and a richly curved figure. Daine, thinking of her own modest curves, sighed with envy.

Numair rose, a stunned look on his face. Alanna slid into the place he'd just left.

'Varice?'

'The same old Varice Kingsford,' the newcomer replied, smiling. 'I'm surprised you remember me.'

Numair kissed first one of her offered hands, then the other, and continued to hold both. 'How could I forget you, my dear? You're lovelier than I remember. You must tell me *everything* I've missed. What changes are in the palace, and at the university? Are you married; may I kill your husband—' Laughing, Varice drew Numair through the crowd, leading him to a niche across the room, where they sat down.

'Is that who I think it is?' Alanna directed the question to Lindhall, who had come to lean against the wall beside the Lioness and Daine.

'She was his lover before he fled the country,' the older mage replied. 'Apparently there were no hard feelings.'

Daine frowned. 'Why didn't she go with him?'

'He didn't ask, and evidently she didn't offer,' said Lindhall. 'But she never married, either, and she's had a few serious proposals.'

One by one, Ozorne's ministers came to speak with various Tortallans and to introduce them to Carthakis. Mages came for Harailt. Lord Martin and both Gareths were led away by the minister who'd stood closest to the emperor in the audience chamber. Even Alanna, who was uncomfortable

in social situations, was deep in talk with a general in the crimson kilt and gold-washed armour of the Imperial Guard, better known as the Red Legion.

Lindhall beckoned to a slave with a tray of fruit. ‘Your small friend will like grapes,’ he told Daine, pointing to Zek. ‘You may also.’ He put a bowl of grapes and plums beside her. Zek devoured the grapes, while Kitten selected a plum.

‘What does *she* do here? Lady Varice?’ Daine asked.

‘She is Ozorne’s official hostess,’ Lindhall replied, his voice neutral. ‘Her magic allows her to specialize in things such as entertainment and cookery.’ He frowned. ‘I hope Arram – Numair – realizes that Varice is now completely devoted to imperial interests.’

Daine looked up at him and realized that here was someone who genuinely cared about her lanky friend. ‘You’ve missed him, haven’t you, sir?’

Lindhall smiled. ‘I never had another student whose interests so closely matched my own, and when he was no longer my student, we became friends. It’s good to see him now, though I am apprehensive. The emperor never forgives. I doubt that he would imperil the peace talks to settle his score with Numair, but I cannot feel easy in my mind about his reasons for issuing that pardon.’

Daine looked down, fighting the urge to tell this man of her own worries and the badger’s ominous warning. She knew it was a bad idea, however nice Lindhall seemed, but she needed to tell someone. If only she could get Numair or Alanna somewhere they couldn’t be overheard! She *didn’t* want to tell Duke Gareth or any of the others. They didn’t know her like Alanna and Numair did, nor did they know about the badger.

‘Master Lindhall, could we have a word?’ someone called.

Lindhall sighed. ‘You’ll be all right here?’ he asked Daine.

‘Yes, thank you,’ she replied, smiling. ‘I’m not going to budge.’

Lindhall looked at the crowds before them. ‘Probably that’s just as well. I promise, when we get the chance, I would like to have a good, long chat about wildlife.’

‘Master Lindhall, the emperor’s birds—’

The mage smiled, pale eyes sympathetic. ‘The emperor will explain, in his own time. That is how things are done here.’

She watched him thread his way through the crowd, and shuddered at the thought of meeting so many strangers. Zek gravely offered her a grape; she accepted, with thanks. Looking around, she wished her pony, Cloud, were here. It had made sense to leave her at home, but now Daine longed for Cloud’s horse sense and tart opinions. She felt lost among so many adults and such magnificent surroundings. The rulers of Tortall didn’t have the kind of wealth, or surplus of mages, to create rooms like this for their palace.

Suddenly Kitten began to trill, producing sounds that rose and fell like music. At intervals she uttered a *chk!* sound. Each time she did so, the girl could see a man-sized distortion in the air to her left where Kitten stared intently.

‘She sees you,’ the girl told the distorted spot. ‘It’s the first thing student mages at the royal university try – the invisibility trick. It doesn’t work with her. You do it well, the best I’ve ever seen, but if you don’t show yourself now, she’ll bite. She *really* dislikes invisibility-spells.’

The air rippled: there stood the Emperor Mage. ‘I trust she won’t bite me,’ he said in a mild voice. ‘I would hate to bleed on this robe.’

Daine’s jaw dropped; she turned to look at the throne. He sat there, too, a figure identical to the one beside her. ‘Simulacrum,’ he explained. ‘A living puppet. I’m uncomfortable at state occasions. They really don’t want *me* in attendance, just something to awe the empire’s guests. I mastered the art of magical copies so that I might be able to move around. May I sit down?’

‘It’s your couch,’ she replied. For a moment she had spoken to him as she might have to King Jonathan or Queen Thayet, monarchs who insisted on informality. Belatedly remembering her

instructions on proper behaviour with the emperor, she said, 'I'm sorry, Your Imperial Majesty. I should bow, or stand, but I'd upset Zek and the fruit and all.'

'Then let us not upset Zek,' said Ozorne, looking at the marmoset in Daine's lap. 'He is the creature you dived so impetuously into the river to save?' The girl blushed and nodded. A smile tugged the emperor's lips. 'It was a kind deed. We need more of them.'

Embarrassed, Daine changed the subject. 'About the copies of you – can't the mages tell it's only sorcery?'

Ozorne snapped his fingers, and a shimmering curtain of light enveloped the dais, hiding the other emperor from sight. 'No. I *am* very good at them. Practice, you see – plenty of state occasions that require the emperor's image, not the man. I tried to teach your master, the former Arram Draper, how to make them, but he was never as adept as I am.'

She ignored the jibe about Numair. 'Can it do magic or look like it has magic? The sim—'

'Simulacrum.' He put his chin on his hand, amber eyes thoughtful. 'No. The fabric of the copy won't hold the chain of spells that would give it the seeming of my magical Gift.'

Numair can do it, she thought. If the emperor hasn't heard it, though, *I'm* not going to tell him. 'Why did you pardon Numair and let him come back, if you're still angry with him?'

He smiled. 'My dear girl – no, you don't care for that, do you?' he asked, correctly interpreting the look on her face. 'Then I shall call you Veralidaine.'

'Daine, please, Your Imperial Majesty.'

'Daine? What is the point of so beautiful a name if it's not used? Veralidaine. At the risk of destroying your illusions, I must tell you I have little control over what is done in this kingdom.' He offered his hand to Kitten. The dragon shook her head, and crouched to examine his toe rings.

'I don't mean to be rude, but of course you do. It's your kingdom, isn't it?'

'Indeed, but – does my royal cousin Jonathan have complete freedom to order what he likes? I assume he has councils and nobles and law to answer to, does he not? I believe Sir Gareth the Younger is the head of his private council, to which Master Numair and Lady Alanna also belong. Duke Gareth leads the Council of Lords, which numbers also Lord Martin of Meron, and Harailt of Aili is head of his Council of Mages. Such men are the real power in any realm, Veralidaine.'

'But they're just advisers. The king can do as he wants, surely.'

The emperor shook his head. 'Alienating one's nobles is a sure way to put a nation into chaos. There are always those who think they can do a ruler's job better. They need little encouragement.'

Daine thought of Yolane of Dunlath, who had planned a rebellion in Tortall with *this* ruler's encouragement, and bit her tongue. Her orders from the king and queen had been specific. She was not to mention the emperor's attempts to weaken Tortall, no matter how much she might want to.

Zek, unconcerned by the emperor's nearness or his scent, a mix of amber and cinnamon, picked his way through the bowl of fruit. When his stomach bulged with his discoveries there, he offered Daine the next grape he found.

'No, thank you,' she said. 'Perhaps His Imperial Majesty would like it.' Zek held the grape up for Ozorne.

He accepted it gravely. 'Thank you, Master Zek.'

Watching him eat the grape, Daine said hesitantly, 'I – heard your birds are sick. It's why I came, but – are they better? Do you not need me to look at them?'

Ozorne's face brightened. 'No, but I thought – after your journey, and all this – when do you wish to see them? I can arrange it for the morning tomorrow, if you don't mind.'

'Um – if they're sick, I'd *like* to see them now. If you can have a servant show me the way—'

'Servants don't go near my birds, except to prepare their food. Are you certain? It seems too much to ask, to have you look at them the night you arrive.'

She grinned. 'Keeping me here when you have sick animals is asking too much.'

He got to his feet, and she followed. ‘Do you mind if I veil us?’ he asked. ‘Otherwise we will be followed; my ministers will want me to stay ...’

Daine looked around. ‘I really should tell the others.’ The problem was that she could spot no one else from her company. While she had been in conversation with the emperor, the crowd had moved away from them to watch dancers in the garden. All she could see were richly dressed backs.

Ozorne raised a hand, and a slave appeared at his elbow. ‘Inform Duke Gareth of the Tortallan guests that Mistress Veralidaine has gone to look at our birds. And send the mage Lindhall Reed to us in the aviary.’

The slave bowed deeply, and the emperor offered Daine his arm. She didn’t see how she could refuse without being rude, and surely the slave would obey the order to tell Duke Gareth where she was. Carefully she rested her palm on Ozorne’s forearm, as she had seen court ladies do at home. The emperor gestured, and a copy of him split away from them to walk back to his throne. The shining barrier that hid the raised seat vanished when the copy reached the dais, and the illusion blended with the copy on the throne. Daine watched it, fascinated, as Ozorne led her through a small door at the back of the antechamber and into a narrow hall. Kitten followed, while Zek settled himself comfortably on Daine’s shoulder.

Globes like those in the room they had just left were placed at intervals along the hall. Passing the first, Ozorne gestured. It lifted free of the clawed iron foot that held it up and followed them, lighting their way through a maze of corridors and empty public rooms.

‘I’ve tried everything,’ he explained. Since the humans they passed bowed to them, Daine realized he must have dropped the invisibility spell once they’d left the reception. ‘The new quarters were finished this spring, and after we moved them in they seemed fine. Then some of my birds took sick. I noticed a palsy in their heads. They became listless; their appetites fell off. Within two weeks of the first signs, the victims die. I know a great deal of bird medicine, and Lindhall Reed has made a study of it, which is why I asked him to join us. Indeed, there he is now.’

Lindhall awaited them in front of a pair of broad white doors on which green flowering vines had been painted. He bowed low to the emperor and smiled at Daine, then turned and opened both doors, thrusting them wide. He clapped twice. Light-globes in the hall that lay before them came to life, to reveal a wonder. On the walls, birds had been inlaid with gold strips. Tiny gems served them as eyes, while craftsmen had used pieces of bright, colourful stone for their plumage. Kitten trilled her appreciation.

‘Oh, *glory*,’ breathed Daine. ‘Your Imperial Majesty, this is – *wondrous*.’

‘It is well enough,’ the emperor said coolly, surveying the inlays. ‘We thought it pretty when we designed it, but no image can take the place of a living bird.’

She couldn’t disagree, but the walls still had to be the finest thing to come from human hands.

At the end of the hall stood another pair of doors, these made of long glass panels. They were frosted and set in a network of metal pieces enamelled a bright, emerald green and shaped like vines.

‘I am a *fool*.’ Ozorne was upset. ‘They will be asleep. We can have light-globes – they are used to that; I often read here at night, but to disturb their rest, even to care for sick ones ...’

‘You must leave that to me,’ Daine told him. ‘I won’t frighten them, and I won’t let the ones who are well interrupt their rest. It’s more important to start work now.’

‘Master Lindhall, will you remain and get whatever Veralidaine needs?’ enquired the emperor. When Daine looked at him curiously, he tried to smile. ‘To see them ill, and to be helpless – do you think less of me? I cannot watch.’

She smiled. ‘I don’t think less of you, sire. I know what it’s like to be helpless when a creature you love is ill and you can’t do anything.’

Lindhall sketched a rune in the air with a glowing finger. When the design was complete, the glass doors opened. He bowed deeply to the emperor, holding the posture, until Daine realized that both of them were waiting for her to do the same. Again she’d forgotten that she was not dealing with

King Jonathan! She curtsied, wobbling a bit, as Zek squeaked and hung on to her curls. Kitten sat up on her hindquarters and bowed, too.

Emperor Ozorne nodded and left, vanishing in plain view as he passed the white doors.

Lindhall went into the aviary first, using finger-snaps to wake two small light-globes near the entrance. They illuminated the area around the door, revealing a marble bench and walks that led between banks of large, thick-leafed plants. Daine looked up and saw the shadows of trees overhead. In the darkness she could hear the murmur of fountains and brooks, and the brush of damp greenery. In her mind, she could hear the whispers of sleeping and waking birds, both well and ill.

Lindhall closed the doors behind them.

‘You don’t have to stay,’ she said quietly. The number of birds in this chamber was surprising, and the thread of ill health weaving through her senses made her feel slightly ill herself. She was starting to regret the last grape she’d eaten. ‘It’ll be fair boring.’

‘I believe I will stay in any event,’ he said, breathy voice kind. ‘Partly because I should like to see you at work, but also partly because I know Numair will feel better if I am with you.’

Daine nodded. ‘Would you mind holding Zek, then?’ she asked. To the marmoset she explained, ‘I’m going to need that shoulder.’

Resigned, the tiny animal climbed down her outstretched arm and onto Lindhall’s immense palm. Zek was beginning to realize that his new friend had her own ways of doing things. Lindhall sat on the bench, stroking Zek’s many-coloured fur with one finger, while Kitten leaped up beside him and settled down to wait. ‘Daine, may I give you a word of warning?’

Looking around, the girl saw the immense bole of a tree nearby. ‘About what, sir?’ She settled into a fold between two large roots, resting her back against the tree.

‘The emperor.’ Lindhall’s pale eyes were troubled. ‘He shows his best side in regard to his birds, and to animals in general. He possesses – other sides.’

She smiled at him. ‘I’ll keep it in mind.’ She didn’t think she had needed the extra warning – not after two years of finding imperial claws hooked into all parts of Tortall. Closing her eyes, she called her patients to her.

The ones in the best condition came first, heads bobbing on weakened necks. Some barely had the strength to fly, a result both of the disease and of the appetite loss that went with it. Daine looked deep inside herself until she found the pool of her magic. She drew it up not in threads, but in ropes, sending fibres of it into each of the birds resting on her shoulders and legs.

If they had a disease, it was like none she had ever seen. To her inner eyes, it shadowed the dab of copper fire that was each bird’s wild magic, leaving a film that grew until it blotted out the animal’s fire, and its life. She burned the shadows away in every bird that could reach her, then rose to find those that couldn’t. She ached all over, particularly in her joints. She ignored it and felt her way into the shrubbery that concealed the rest of her patients from her. Many were on the ground, too weak to move. Three had died since the last time the place was cleaned. She stubbornly went after each flickering life light she could sense.

Some had made it to aboveground nests. The thought of climbing the large trees of this indoor enclosure was daunting, but she found a stair that followed the walls in an upward spiral. Using it, she searched out the rest of her patients. At last she had seen to all of them. Lindhall must have heard her coming down the stair: he, Kitten, and Zek met her at the bottom.

‘How did it go?’ the man asked.

‘They’re healed – for now, at least. Oh, dear.’ Now that she was in somewhat better light, she could properly see that her hands, arms, and dress were coated with heavy, white droppings. Before coming down, she’d scraped the worst off with leaves and twigs, but her splendid gown was ruined. Even one of Kitten’s magical sounds wouldn’t save the cloth.

‘Perhaps I should continue to hold Zek,’ Lindhall said tactfully. ‘Would you like me to show you to your room?’ She brightened, looking up at him, and he laughed. ‘My dear, I’ve lost more garments

to animal droppings than I can count. Clothing is not worth a candle when placed against what you have done here. Come. We'll go through the gardens, where no one will see you.'

Kitten, following them down the hall with the bird inlays on the walls, whistle-croaked. The stone birds lit up. Lindhall grinned with pleasure as lapis, jade, and citrine shimmered in their natural colours. Once that had faded, they went out into the gardens.

'What was wrong with the birds?' he asked, navigating the tangled paths.

'It's not a disease. Could they have eaten mouldy seed or anything like that? I think they were poisoned somehow.'

'It's possible, though the slaves are vigilant with the food that goes to those birds. They have to be. Do you think the poisoning was deliberate?' They passed a large, many-tiered fountain lit from within by glowing stones.

'I don't know. If they get sick again, I can check their food and things like that. Should I mention poisoning to the emperor?'

'Please don't. He would kill the slaves. It wouldn't matter to him if the poisoning were deliberate or not – only that it happened. He might torture them first, to see if it *was* deliberate, but it wouldn't do much good. All his personal slaves are mutes.'

Daine shivered as they entered another wing of the palace. Now she knew their surroundings: the guest quarters, near the wing set aside for the Tortallan delegation. A slave dozing in the central area onto which the rooms opened jumped to his feet and held the door to Daine's room, trying not to stare at her.

'She will be going out to bathe in a few moments,' Lindhall said. The slave nodded without looking up. 'Daine, will you be all right? Shall I have Lady Alanna look in on you?'

She smiled up at him. 'I'm just tired, and I need to wash, that's all. Thank you, Master Lindhall. Numair said you are *very* kind, and he was right.'

To her amusement, the lanky mage blushed. 'Well, good night, then.'

About to enter her room, she said, 'Oh, wait – if it's possible, can the birds be left alone all day tomorrow? They can be fed as long as food's left *quietly*.' She had seen food trays and water bowls somewhere in the aviary. 'If there's a way to keep it dark in the aviary for half of the day, I'd use it.'

He looked interested. 'Of course – I can manage it, actually. Glass walls conduct magic well, and it's no great matter to make them dark. You want the birds to sleep? Even the healthy ones?'

'It won't harm them, and the rest will get the sick ones over their reaction to the healing. Birds are funny.' She yawned. 'When they're up and alert, their bodies use energy faster than any other animals. The magic sticks better if they can sleep for a while after I'm done.'

'I shall take care of it. Try not to fall asleep in your bath. Good night, Veralidaine – and welcome to Carthak.' He closed the door for her.

'I like him,' the girl told Zek and Kitten drowsily.

So do I, replied the marmoset as Kitten also nodded agreement.

Slowly, half asleep already, Daine began to gather her bathing things.

She woke early, with no ill effects from the previous night's work. By the time she dressed and left her room, a large breakfast had been laid out in the area common to the bedchambers occupied by the Tortallans. The others were emerging from their rooms to eat.

'It went quite well last night,' Duke Gareth said once they were settled. 'Some of the imperial ministers are more forthcoming than others, but that is to be expected. I am *particularly* happy with the reports I've had of *you*, Daine.'

Startled, the girl looked up, her teeth halfway into a bite of melon. Blushing crimson, she put the forkful onto her plate again. 'Me, Your Grace?'

'Emperor Ozorne heard from Master Lindhall that you cured his birds in one session,' explained Harailt of Aili. 'The emperor is *very* pleased – says he has to think of a proper way to express his thanks.'

‘It’s like that with some men in high places,’ commented Gareth the Younger, buttering a roll. ‘Things that would impress *us* have no effect on them, but a kindness done to creatures they love, they never forget.’ He looked at Daine, brown eyes uncomfortably keen. ‘I hope you’ll continue to stay on his good side. The ministers’ definition of concessions they will and won’t make changed to our benefit after the emperor thanked us for bringing you.’

Daine frowned as she passed a roll to Kitten. That didn’t sound much like the way Ozorne had described himself – as a ruler whose lords told *him* what to do.

‘Which reminds me,’ Numair said, feeding Zek as the marmoset sat on his lap. ‘We’re scheduled to have a tour of the imperial menagerie after breakfast.’

Daine gulped. ‘A menagerie?’ King Jonathan had possessed rare, caged animals when she first came to Tortall. Even going near it had been a torment until the king began to change it, making it into enclosures that resembled the captives’ original homes.

‘Ozorne would never ill-treat his animals,’ said Numair, seeing the discomfort in her eyes.

‘Don’t slight him by staying behind,’ added Gareth the Younger.

Alanna hugged Daine around the shoulders. ‘She wouldn’t think of it, Gary. Leave her be.’

Daine smiled at her friend, and slipped the rest of her melon to Kitten. Somehow she wasn’t hungry any more.

They had just got up from the table when their guides arrived, Prince Kaddar and Varice Kingsford. Daine scowled as the lady, dressed in clinging green silk with a transparent white veil over her hair, kissed Numair’s cheek, smiling flirtatiously at him. ‘I shall walk with His Grace,’ the lady told Numair, ‘but stay close, please. You know so much more about animals than I do.’

Duke Gareth bowed over Varice’s hand. ‘Numair’s loss is my gain, Lady Varice.’

Prince Kaddar bowed to Alanna. ‘May I offer you my escort, Lioness?’

Alanna grinned, resting her hands on her sword belt. ‘On such a beautiful day you shouldn’t be stuck with an old lady like me,’ she said wickedly. ‘I don’t believe Daine has an escort.’

Kaddar smiled and turned to Daine. ‘Then I am free to offer my arm to you, lady.’

My friend, Daine thought, glaring at the Lioness. To Kaddar she gave a lukewarm smile. ‘I’m no lady, Your Highness – just Daine.’

The amenities over, the group was led by Varice and the prince down a maze of paths that led past a formal garden and partway around the shore of an ornamental lake. Daine closed off the links her magic formed to the animal world around her. She could no more hear Zek’s thoughts and feelings than she would hear the zoo captives, but the marmoset understood when she explained why she was closing herself off. I don’t like cages either, he said balefully, chittering in anger. They put my mate and our little ones and me in a cage, and then we were sold.

At last they walked through wrought-iron gates topped by the imperial seal: a crossed sword and wand, topped by a crown, wrapped in a jagged circle.

CHAPTER 3

HALL OF BONES

‘My uncle loves animals,’ the prince said dryly as the girl stared at the scene before her. ‘He tries to give them room, and the foods they prefer, and companionship. The ones that don’t thrive in captivity he sends back to their homes.’

She should have realized that the man who showed such devotion to his birds might pay similar attention to other creatures. While the animals here were contained, they had far more space in which to move than she had seen in the royal menagerie when she had first arrived in Tortall. Lions basked in the sun, living at the bottom of a well too deep for escape. A lively brook flowed through the enclosure, and desert trees grew on one side, offering shade from the midday sun. Chimpanzees raced around an immense cage equipped with a large, many-branched and leafless ‘tree’ for their enjoyment. On an island in the middle of a deep pond, strange, reddish-faced monkeys Kaddar identified as macaques climbed over and around heaped rocks.

Giraffes gazed at her solemnly over a tall iron fence. Daine couldn’t help herself: she went to them, hands out, letting the wards on her power fall slightly. Startled, the giraffes dropped their heads low on their impossibly long necks to lip her fingers and say hello while Zek warned them to behave themselves.

‘It’s all right,’ the girl told him, smiling as a young giraffe snuffled her tunic. ‘They’re grazers. They won’t hurt you.’

We don’t have *anything* like that where *I* come from, the marmoset replied with offended dignity. We have *proper* animals there.

Kaddar, who’d been taken aside by a keeper, rejoined her. ‘Has your king anything this good?’

Daine bristled at the smugness in his voice. The hot reply on her lips was cut off by Harailt. ‘Actually, we’re trying something a bit uncommon.’ He gave Daine a half wink. ‘We *royal* university mages are working with builders on a new kind of menagerie, a bit like this one, but much broader in scope. We duplicate the lands each animal comes from – plants, weather, and all; you see where the mages come in. When it’s done, within the confines of the royal menagerie, a guest will visit small pieces of Carthak, and the Copper Isles, and Scanra.’

Kaddar’s eyes lit with enthusiasm. As he pelted Harailt with questions, Daine wandered down the curving path with Zek and Kitten, out of sight of the others. Here she discovered a pit in which giant, long-nosed pigs drowsed in a deep pond. Their noses, shorter than an elephant’s but nearly as flexible, pointed towards Daine as she passed. Opposite them, a colony of mongooses watched her from behind wire mesh that enclosed a high and far-reaching mound of burrows. Beyond them the path took an abrupt left turn.

This last enclosure lay below ground level, inside a glassy wall four yards down from the girl’s feet. The area was less well kept than the others. A small pond lay near the wall, but much of the water in it had evaporated. The grass was brown-edged and lay in patches on bare, dusty-looking ground. The remains of shattered bones lay everywhere. In the back, lying out of the sun in a shallow cave, were three shaggy, spotted brown bodies.

She opened a wider crack in her magic’s defences, reaching for these strangers. ‘Please come out,’ she called aloud. A twitch of movement: three rounded pairs of ears came to bear on her.

You smell of cold places, one voice, commanding and female, said. You smell of frozen rain and pine trees. You smell of far away. Me and my boys never had a whiff of someone like you.

Blinking huge eyes in the sunlight, the speaker came to the foot of the wall. She was followed by two smaller males.

Daine wished she could meet the god who had moulded these creatures. There was a god with *imagination*. The source of the shattered bones had to be those powerful jaws, equipped with strong teeth. The least of these creatures weighed more than she did. On their fours they were tallest and heaviest at the shoulder, their spotted fur covering slablike muscle. Their hindquarters were low and short, but strong. Small tails sported jaunty tufts at the end.

‘They’re *beautiful*,’ she breathed.

‘Spotted hyenas,’ Numair said at her elbow. ‘From the grass plains of Ekallatum, far to the south. Night hunters, for the most part – see the eyes? They have the strongest bite of any mortal predator – it crushes even the bones of water buffalo. Hyena packs are matriarchal—’

‘Matri-what?’ she asked. Kitten voiced an enquiring whistle of her own.

Numair smiled. ‘Their society is ruled by females. Each pack is led by sisters.’

‘Sensible of them,’ Daine said, grinning up at him.

‘Excuse me.’ It was Varice. She bore down on them with a brittle-looking smile. ‘I’m sorry. These animals aren’t to be shown to visitors. I don’t know why the emperor keeps them, when he doesn’t even like them ... Numair, Daine, please come back. There’s another part of the menagerie you haven’t seen.’ Linking her arm through Numair’s, she led him away from the hyenas.

Come back sometime, offered the female hyena. Me and my boys are always around.

‘I’ll do my best,’ Daine promised. ‘C’mon, Kit.’

When she caught up to the rest of the group, the prince led them through a second barred gate. ‘This is my uncle’s other collection,’ he announced. ‘Each and every one was captured and brought here for causing trouble for humans.’

Kitten screeched. Daine hushed her, but felt like screeching herself. The cages in this wide courtyard, none of them as pleasant as those for the mortal animals, held immortals. Brass plates on each cage identified killer unicorns, griffins, the flesh-eating winged horses called hurroks, and giant, lizardlike hunters known as Coldfangs. Here, too, she saw unlikely combinations of human and animal: giant, human-headed spiders called spidrens and centaurs of both the peaceful and blood-hungry kinds, the former with hooves and hands, the latter with talons.

To her surprise, one cage held a man and a woman with steel-feathered wings and claws instead of arms and legs – Stormwings. The male had a pale, intense face, aquiline nose, and fixed, hungry eyes. The female’s nose was hawklike, her dark eyes imperious. She had been beautiful in her youth, it was plain, and now, older, she was haughty and commanding.

Daine looked at Kaddar. ‘I thought your uncle was allied with the Stormwings!’

‘He is,’ replied Ozorne’s nephew. ‘The price of the pact with the Stormwing King Jokhun was that Queen Barzha and her mate Hebakh be kept here. Believe me, she would have caused as much havoc in Carthak as Stormwings have in the north, if my uncle had not made the alliance.’

Daine was trembling. ‘What do you feed them?’ she asked, shaking off someone’s restraining hand. ‘Do you bring folk in and scare them, so they can live on that? And these cages are too small. The griffin can barely open its wings.’ Kitten muttered unpleasant things in dragon.

‘They don’t need food, and they don’t require more room,’ said Varice impatiently. ‘You know these monsters don’t fall ill and die. Unless you kill one, they live forever. Would you rather let them raid villages and destroy crops?’

‘We mean no criticism of the way the emperor chooses to run his domain,’ said Duke Gareth. His eyes locked on Daine with a message she couldn’t ignore. She looked at her shoes, biting her lip before more rash words spilled out. ‘Daine speaks only because her bond with all creatures gives her a dislike of cages. Your Highness, my lady, I regret to say I am not as young as I was. Might we find somewhere shaded, and sit for a moment? Your sun is fierce, even this early.’

Their group streamed out through the gates. Daine alone hesitated, staring at these captives. She had no reason to like spidrens, Stormwings, hurroks, Coldfangs, and their kind. Too much of her time in Tortall had gone to fighting immortals like these. Stormwings in particular had caused her,

personally, a great many problems. She ought to be glad these were locked away from doing more harm – oughtn't she?

At midmorning she returned to her rooms, to find an old servant woman there, straightening things. 'Don't mind me,' she said, her grin revealing a handful of teeth. 'You sit down. I won't be but another minute.' She flicked a duster over one of the carved screens.

Awkward and unsure of what to say, Daine sat on a chair. She guessed this was a slave, though she was much older than the other palace slaves that she had seen. The woman's dress was undyed cotton, looped over one bony shoulder and hanging just to skinny knees. She wore straw sandals. Her only ornament, if it could be called that, was a tattooed bracelet of snaky lines that twined around each other.

Putting aside her duster, the old woman took the pillow from the bed and plumped it. 'You're from up north, aren't you?' she asked. 'Up Tortall way?'

Kitten trotted over and tugged the woman's dress, chattering loudly.

'Not now, dearie,' the slave told her, apparently comfortable with a dragon in the room. 'I have things to do.'

'Over here, Kit,' summoned Daine.

The slave laid her hand on Kitten's muzzle. 'Enough,' she said, black eyes dancing wickedly in a seamed face. The dragon was instantly silent. Turning back to the bed, the woman grappled with the slippery eiderdown.

Daine barely noticed Kitten's abrupt silence. Her upbringing got the better of her, and she stood, placing Zek on her seat. Ma had not raised her to sit idle, not when housework was to be done. She also had not been raised to let an elder work without aid. 'Here, grandmother – let me help. Kit, move.' The dragon ducked under the chair. Together the girl and the old woman bared the sheets on the bed and began to neaten them.

'Yes, I'm from Tortall,' Daine said. 'From Galla, before that.'

'Your first trip to Carthak? What do you make of us Southerners, eh? D'you like it here?'

It occurred to Daine that the woman might be a spy, there to get information from her. 'It's all right,' she said hesitantly. 'It's very different from home, of course.'

'It's in trouble, you know – the empire.' The gnarled old hands were busy, tugging and straightening. 'Famine in the South, five years running – did they tell you? Locusts – folk out of work – wells drying up. It's as if the gods have turned their faces from the emperor.'

'It – it's not my place to say,' Daine stammered.

'You ought to look around a bit. *Really* look. Long as you're here. The priests don't like the omens, you know. They whisper that a cold wind's blowing from the Divine Realms. Might be next time you visit Carthak, it won't be here. Hard to argue with gods, when they're done being nice to mortals.' Briskly she patted the coverlet into place.

Daine blinked at the woman. Her words sounded too much like what the badger had said. And weren't slaves supposed to be quiet and timid? None of the others had talked to her like this one did: all they'd said was 'Yes, Nobility,' 'No, Nobility,' and 'Right away, Nobility.'

'Do *you* think the gods are vexed with Carthak?' she asked, digging her hands into her pockets.

The slave ran her duster over the writing desk. 'Ask them to show you the temples,' she advised, apparently not hearing Daine's question. 'The shrines. They used to be the glory of the empire. Now they think mages and armies are imperial glory. They think – the emperor thinks – he doesn't *need* the gods.' Wickedly, she reached with the duster and flicked the end of Kitten's nose as the dragon peered out from under the chair.

Kitten sneezed, then squealed with outrage as her scales turned angry red. Her voice rose as she hooted and chattered with fury. Daine begged her to be quiet, but there was no silencing the dragon this time. The girl knelt and clamped her hands on her muzzle. 'Stop that this instant!' she ordered. 'Look at Zek – you're hurting his poor ears, and you're hurting mine!'

Kitten glanced at Zek. The marmoset sat gravely on the back of the chair, paws over his ears. Slowly turning a sullen grey, the dragon whistled what sounded like an apology.

‘She wants discipline,’ remarked the old lady, sounding breathless. ‘Her own folk would never allow her to speak out of turn.’

Concentrating on Kitten and Zek, Daine had taken her eyes off her visitor. When she turned to ask the servant what she had meant, she discovered that the old woman had dragged the tiger-skin rug from under the bed and was attempting to stand with it bundled into her arms.

Daine’s reaction was automatic. ‘Here, grandmother – I’ll take that,’ she said, holding out her hands. ‘Just tell me where it goes—’

The woman dumped the bundle into Daine’s grip, and white light flared. Kitten shrieked as the skin began to writhe. The girl dropped it, horrified. Her head swam, and she toppled over, landing on her hands and knees next to the fur.

As she gasped for air, the skin rippled. The great forepaw, by her toes, flexed. Long, razor claws shot out, then resheathed themselves. By her nose a hind paw stretched, then braced itself on the floor. The rump, no longer flat on the stone, wriggled. Slowly, as if a body filled the empty hide, the cat got to its feet, hindquarters first, then forepaws. The tail lashed.

Daine scooted away from it. ‘Grandmother, you’d best get out of here!’ she cried.

The door opened. A slave peered in, seeing first Zek and Kitten by the chair, then Daine. The door hid the rug from her view. The slave knelt and bowed her head, putting her right fist on her left shoulder. ‘You called this unworthy one, Nobility?’

‘No,’ said Daine. ‘I mean, yes, I mean—’

The slave touched the floor with her forehead. Daine lunged to her feet. ‘Please don’t do that,’ she pleaded, not sure if she spoke to the slave or the tiger. ‘I don’t – I can’t – I’m not a Nobility, all right?’

‘Forgive this one’s faults, Nobility. What do you need? This unworthy one is here to serve.’

She took a breath and got herself in hand. ‘Please get up. And – where’s the old woman?’

‘Old woman, Nobility?’ asked the slave. ‘There is no old woman here.’

Baffled, Daine looked around. The old servant was gone, feather duster and all. ‘She was just here a moment ago – you must have passed her.’ She grabbed the door, holding it so that the kneeling slave would have no glimpse of the tiger behind it. ‘She was cleaning in here.’

The slave looked up. ‘The care of your room is this unworthy one’s task, Nobility,’ she said, clearly frightened. ‘It was done some time ago, shortly after the Nobilities from the north went with the prince and Lady Varice.’

Daine thought fast. The old slave must have fled in that moment when the light blazed. No doubt she’d been frightened out of her wits; Daine knew her own knees were decidedly weak. She had to calm down, because now she was scaring this poor girl as well. ‘It’s all right,’ she said, attempting a smile. ‘I – I must have been napping, and had a – a dream or something. I—’

She looked behind the door. The tiger skin lay on the marble tiles, all four paws tucked underneath, tail curled around its chest. The head rested on the floor, eyes closed. If she hadn’t known better, she would have sworn the thing looked smug – except, of course, that dead animal skins couldn’t manage that kind of expression.

‘Would you do me a favour?’ She closed the door so that the slave could see the tiger skin. ‘This – rug. It’s very – upsetting, to have it here. Will you take it away? *Far* away?’

From the look on her face as she rose, the slave was used to odd requests. ‘Yes, Nobility.’ The rug offered her no more resistance than a blanket might have done. With a last bow, she left.

Trembling, Daine said, ‘Thank you,’ and started to close the door.

‘Daine?’ Alanna was in the central room outside, dressed for the opening of the peace negotiations. ‘You’d best hurry or we’ll be late for the banquet.’

Daine winced and shut the door. Between talking to the old slave, having the rug come to life on her, and handling the young slave, she had forgotten she had to clean up and change again. ‘I don’t know how much more excitement I can take,’ she told Zek and Kitten as she stripped off her tunic and shirt. ‘To think the king thought I might get bored while I was here!’

The opening banquet started at noon, a feast of the light, cool foods preferred in warmer lands for daytime. From the talk around Daine, such meals were Varice Kingsford’s special pride. It was the kind of thing that had foreigners from all over the Eastern and Southern Lands singing the praises of the emperor’s table. The girl surveyed the bewildering variety of choices and let Zek help her choose. The marmoset was an expert on plant foods, at least.

Varice was everywhere, seeing to the comfort of the Tortallan delegation and the foreign ambassadors to Carthak who had been invited to observe the talks on behalf of their rulers. With so many lords to attend to, she didn’t appear to notice that Numair barely touched his food.

Daine noticed, and felt sorry for her tall friend. Varice had filled his plate herself, heaping it with delicacies like eel pastry, elephant-ear soup, and snake medallions in black bean and wine sauce. It was the worst thing she could have done. Numair’s body did not always travel well, particularly not after a sea or river voyage. Usually he spent several days in a new place eating mild, simple foods – the only things he could keep down. He nodded and gave polite thanks when she stopped to ask how he did, but Daine could see a tinge of green around his lips.

Luckily the dogs and cats who served as palace mouse and rat catchers were everywhere, even here in the banquet hall. Daine silently asked two dogs for help. When a paw on the mage’s knee caused Numair to look down, he saw them at his feet, willing to be fed. The look he gave Daine was filled with gratitude. She didn’t see the costly food leave his plate, but she didn’t expect to: Numair’s hobby was sleight of hand. The dogs she heard clearly. They were delighted with their feast.

At last the emperor led them to the room where the talks would be held. Tables and chairs had been placed in a loose square, and unshuttered windows allowed breezes and garden scents to pass through. The Tortallans, the foreign ambassadors, and the Carthaki ministers were given seats, their places marked with nameplates of gold inlaid with silver. Jugs of water, juice, and herbal teas were at all the tables. Carthaki scribes sat cross-legged against one wall, ready to take notes, while the Tortallan scribes had their own table, directly behind Duke Gareth’s seat. Those who would not take part, such as Lindhall Reed and lesser nobles and officials, sat in chairs behind the delegations. Daine sat at the end of her table, uncomfortable even there. Kitten had a stool to perch on, beside the girl; Zek hid in his usual place under Daine’s hair.

Ozorne rose to speak, dressed in a blindingly white robe and green shoulder wrap. His hair, unglided today, proved to be reddish brown, though it was still in many fine braids, each tipped with a gold filigree bead. Black paint lined his amber eyes back to his temples. He glittered with gems.

‘We bid you welcome, representatives of our eminent cousin, King Jonathan of Tortall, and of his queen, Thayet the Peerless, and of our fellow monarchs and neighbours.’ His voice filled the room. ‘This day has been too long in coming. At last we are met in a spirit of mutual aid and support for our lands, so long at odds. Villains conspired to bring us to the brink of war, but wisdom and vigilance have kept us from stepping over. All our hearts desire only peace.’

‘Without our knowledge and consent, evil men contrived four years ago to steal arcane learning secretly held for centuries. With this ill-gained knowledge, they reversed what the writers of those spells had dedicated their lives to achieve, the banning from our human, mortal existence those creatures loosely called immortals, the semidivine beings who may live forever unless accident or force brings their life spans to a halt.’

‘To our sorrow, our person and our university were blamed for this dreadful misuse of power. Our cousins of Tortall, sore beset by immortals and by those who prey on a land open to attack, felt we were to blame, and who could contest it? Loving freedom and commerce, we kept too little watch on our library, on our shipwrights, on those who hired men and paid them in Carthaki gold. To

our shame and sorrow, our lack of awareness caused our Tortallan cousins to think we condoned the behaviour of pirates, bandits, and rogues. Let us now set the matter straight. Let us strive together for peace between our peoples, and put aside all past misunderstandings.

‘May the gods bless our endeavours, and may they foster the peace for which we all long.’ Clasp his hands together, he touched them to his forehead in a kind of salute, and sat down.

Duke Gareth rose to make his reply, reading from a letter written to Ozorne and his ministers by King Jonathan. Daine hid a yawn under one hand. She might have found the letter more interesting if she had not heard discussion about its contents on the voyage to Carthak. Instead her mind kept skipping away from Duke Gareth’s voice, returning to the tiger-skin rug, or to the badger’s visit, over and over. She had mentioned the need to talk to Numair and Alanna on their way to the noon banquet, but she knew it might be some time before they could get the chance to safely hear what she had to say. As the emperor’s guests, most of their time away from the talks would be taken up with entertainments and activities. Both had promised to do what they could, and Daine had to be content with that.

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