

Prologue

On the third day of the convocation, two of the Slonimi scouts killed a calf, and the herbalist's boy wept because he'd watched the calf being born and grown to love it. His mother stroked his hair and promised he would forget by the time the feast came, the following night. He told her he would never forget. She said, "Just wait."

He spent all of the next day playing with the children from the other caravan; three days before, they'd all been strangers, but Slonimi children were used to making friends quickly. The group the boy and his mother traveled with had come across the desert to the south, and they found the cool air of the rocky plain a relief from the heat. The others had come from the grassy plains farther west, and were used to milder weather. While the adults traded news and maps and equipment, the children ran wild. Only one boy, from the other caravan, didn't run or play: a pale boy, with fine features, who followed by habit a few feet behind one of the older women from the other caravan. "Derie's apprentice," the other children told him, and shrugged, as if there was nothing more to say. The older woman was the other group's best Worker, with dark hair going to grizzle and gimlet eyes. Every time she appeared the herbalist suddenly remembered an herb her son needed to help her prepare, or something in their wagon that needed cleaning. The boy was observant, and clever, and it didn't take him long to figure out that his mother was trying to keep him away from the older woman: she, who had always demanded he face everything head-on, who had no patience for what she called squeamishness and megrims.

After a hard day of play over the rocks and dry, grayish grass, the boy was starving. A cold wind blew down over the rocky plain from the never-melting snow that topped the high peaks of the Barriers to the east; the bonfire was warm. The meat smelled good. The boy had not forgotten the calf but when his mother brought him meat and roasted potatoes and soft pan bread on a plate, he did not think of him. Gerta—the head driver of the boy's caravan—had spent the last three days with the other head driver, poring over bloodline records to figure out who between their two groups might be well matched for breeding, and as soon as everybody had a plate of food in front of them they announced the results. The adults and older teenagers seemed to find this all fascinating. The herbalist's boy was nine years old and he didn't understand the fuss. He knew how it went: the matched pairs would travel together until a child was on the way, and then most likely never see each other again. Sometimes they liked each other, sometimes they didn't. That, his mother had told him, was what brandy was for.

The Slonimi caravans kept to well-defined territories, and any time two caravans met there was feasting and trading and music and matching, but this was no ordinary meeting, and both sides knew it. After everyone had eaten their fill, a few bottles were passed. Someone had a set of pipes and someone else had a sitar, but after a song or two, nobody wanted any more music. Gerta—who was older than the other driver—stood up. She was tall and strong, with ropy, muscular limbs. "Well," she said, "let's see them."

In the back, the herbalist slid an arm around her son. He squirmed under the attention but bore it.

From opposite sides of the fire, a young man and a young woman were produced. The young man, Tobin, had been traveling with Gerta's people for years. He was smart but not unkind, but the herbalist's son thought him aloof. With good reason, maybe; Tobin's power was so strong that being near him made the hair on the back of the boy's neck stand up. Unlike all the other Workers—who were always champing at the bit to get a chance to show off—Tobin was secretive about his skills. He shared a wagon with Tash, Gerta's best Worker, even though the two men didn't seem particularly friendly with each other. More than once the boy had glimpsed their lantern burning late into the night, long after the main fire was embers.

The young woman had come across the plains with the others. The boy had seen her a few times; she was small, round, and pleasant-enough looking. She didn't strike the boy as particularly remarkable. But when she came forward, the other caravan's best Worker—the woman named Derie—came with her. Tash stood up when Tobin did, and when they all stood in front of Gerta, the caravan driver looked from one of them to the other. "Tash and Derie," she said, "you're sure?"

"Already decided, and by smarter heads than yours," the gimlet-eyed woman snapped.

Tash, who wasn't much of a talker, merely said, "Sure."

Gerta looked back at the couple. For couple they were; the boy could see the strings tied round each wrist, to show they'd already been matched. "Hard to believe," she said. "But I know it's true. I can feel it down my spine. Quite a legacy you two carry; five generations' worth, ever since mad old Martin bound up the power in the world. Five generations of working and planning and plotting and hoping; that's the legacy you two carry." The corner of her mouth twitched slightly. "No pressure."

A faint ripple of mirth ran through the listeners around the fire. "Nothing to joke about, Gerta," Derie said, lofty and hard, and Gerta nodded.

"I know it. They just seem so damn young, that's all." The driver sighed and shook her head. "Well, it's a momentous occasion. We've come here to see the two of you off, and we send with you the hopes of all the Slonimi, all the Workers of all of our lines, back to the great John Slonim himself, whose plan this was. His blood runs in both of you. It's strong and good and when we put it up against what's left of Martin's, we're bound to prevail, and the world will be free."

"What'll we do with ourselves then, Gert?" someone called out from the darkness, and this time the laughter was a full burst, loud and relieved.

Gerta smiled. "Teach the rest of humanity how to use the power, that's what we'll do. Except you, Fausto. You can clean up after the horses."

More laughter. Gerta let it run out, and then turned to the girl.

"Maia," she said, serious once more. "I know Derie's been drilling this into you since you were knee-high, but once you're carrying, the clock is ticking. Got to be inside, at the end."

“I know,” Maia said.

Gerta scanned the crowd. “Caterina? Cat, where are you?”

Next to the boy, the herbalist cleared her throat. “Here, Gerta.”

Gerta found her, nodded, and turned back to Maia. “Our Cat’s the best healer the Slonimi have. Go see her before you set out. If you’ve caught already, she’ll know. If you haven’t, she’ll know how to help.”

“It’s only been three days,” Tobin said, sounding slighted.

“Nothing against you, Tobe,” Gerta said. “Nature does what it will. Sometimes it takes a while.”

“Not this time,” Maia said calmly.

A murmur ran through the crowd. Derie sat up bolt-straight, her lips pressed together. “You think so?” Gerta said, matching Maia’s tone—although nobody was calm, even the boy could feel the sudden excited tension around the bonfire.

“I know so,” Maia said, laying a hand on her stomach. “I can feel her.”

The tension exploded in a mighty cheer. Instantly, Tobin wiped the sulk off his face and replaced it with pride. The boy leaned into his mother and whispered, under the roar, “Isn’t it too soon to tell?”

“For most women, far too soon, by a good ten days. For Maia?” Caterina sounded as if she were talking to herself, as much as to her son. The boy felt her arm tighten around him. “If she says there’s a baby, there’s a baby.”

After that the adults got drunk. Maia and Tobin slipped away early. Caterina knew a scout from the other group, a man named Sadao, and watching the two of them dancing together, the boy decided to make himself scarce. Tash would have an empty bunk, now that Tobin was gone, and he never brought women home. He’d probably share. If not, there would be a bed somewhere. There always was.

In the morning, the boy found Caterina by the fire, only slightly bleary, and brewing a kettle of strong-smelling tea. Her best hangover cure, she told her son. He took out his notebook and asked what was in it. Ginger, she told him, and willowbark, and a few other things; he wrote them all down carefully. Labeled the page. Caterina’s Hangover Cure.

Then he looked up to find the old woman from the bonfire, Derie, listening with shrewd, narrow eyes. Behind her hovered her apprentice, the pale boy, who this morning had a bruised cheek. “Charles, go fetch my satchel,” she said to him, and he scurried away. To Caterina, Derie said, “Your boy’s conscientious.”

“He learns quickly,” Caterina said, and maybe she just hadn’t had enough hangover tea yet, but the boy thought she sounded wary.

“And fair skinned,” Derie said. “Who’s his father?”

“Jasper Arasgain.”

Derie nodded. “Travels with Afia’s caravan, doesn’t he? Solid man.”

Caterina shrugged. The boy had only met his father a few times. He knew Caterina found Jasper boring.

“Healer’s a good trade. Everywhere needs healers.” Derie paused. “A healer could find his way in anywhere, I’d say. And with that skin—”

The boy noticed Gerta nearby, listening. Her own skin was black as obsidian. “Say what you’re thinking, Derie,” the driver said.

“Highfall,” the old woman said, and immediately, Caterina said, “No.”

“It’d be a great honor for him, Cat,” Gerta said. The boy thought he detected a hint of reluctance in Gerta’s voice.

“Has he done his first Work yet?” Derie said.

Caterina’s lips pressed together. “Not yet.”

Charles, the bruised boy, reappeared with Derie’s satchel.

“We’ll soon change that,” the old woman said, taking the satchel without a word and rooting through until she found a small leather case. Inside was a small knife, silver-colored but without the sheen of real silver.

The boy noticed his own heartbeat, hard hollow thuds in his chest. He glanced at his mother. She looked unhappy, her brow furrowed. But she said nothing.

“Come here, boy,” Derie said.

He sneaked another look at his mother, who still said nothing, and went to stand next to the woman. “Give me your arm,” she said, and he did. She held his wrist with a hand that was both soft and hard at the same time. Her eyes were the most terrifying thing he’d ever seen.

“It’s polite to ask permission before you do this,” she told him. “Not always possible, but polite. I need to see what’s in you, so if you say no, I’ll probably still cut you, but—do I have your permission?”

Behind Derie, Gerta nodded. The bruised boy watched curiously.

“Yes,” the boy said.

“Good,” Derie said. She made a quick, confident cut in the ball of her thumb, made an identical cut in his small hand, quickly drew their two sigils on her skin in the blood, and pressed the cuts together.

The world unfolded. But unfolded was too neat a word, too tidy. This was like when he’d gone wading in the western sea and been knocked off his feet, snatched underwater, tossed in a maelstrom of sand and sun and green water and foam—but this time it wasn’t merely sand and sun and water and foam that swirled around him, it was everything. All of existence, all that had ever been, all that would ever be. His mother was there, bright and hot as the bonfire the night before—not her face or her voice but the Caterina of her, her very essence rendered into flame and warmth.

But most of what he felt was Derie. Derie, immense and powerful and fierce: Derie, reaching into him, unfolding him as surely as she’d unfolded the world. And this was neat and tidy, methodical, almost cold. She unpacked him like a trunk, explored him like a new village. She sought out his secret corners and dark places. When he felt her approval, he thrilled. When he felt her contempt, he trembled. And everywhere she went she left a trace of herself behind like a scent, like the chalk marks the Slonimi sometimes left for each other. Her sigil was hard-edged, multi-cornered. It was everywhere. There was no part of him where it wasn’t.

Then it was over, and he was kneeling by the campfire, throwing up. Caterina was next to him, making soothing noises as she wrapped a cloth around his hand. He leaned against her, weak and grateful.

“It’s all right, my love,” she whispered in his ear, and the nervousness was gone. Now she sounded proud, and sad, and as if she might be crying. “You did well.”

He closed his eyes and saw, on the inside of his eyelids, the woman’s hard, angular sigil, burning like a horse brand.

“Don’t coddle him,” Derie said, and her voice reached through him, back into the places inside him where she’d left her mark. Caterina’s arm dropped away. He forced himself to open his eyes and stand up. His entire body hurt. Derie was watching him, calculating but—yes—pleased. “Well, boy,” she said. “You’ll never be anyone’s best Worker, but you’re malleable, and you’ve got the right look. There’s enough power in you to be of use, once you’re taught to use it. You want to learn?”

“Yes,” he said, without hesitating.

“Good,” she said. “Then you’re my apprentice now, as much as your mother’s. You’ll still learn herbs from your mother, so we’ll join our wagon to your group. But don’t expect the kisses and cuddles from me you get from her. For me, you’ll work hard and you’ll learn hard and maybe someday you’ll be worthy of the knowledge I’ll pass on to you. Say, Yes, Derie.”

“Yes, Derie,” he said.

“You’ve got a lot to learn,” she said. “Go with Charles. He’ll show you where you sleep.”

He hesitated, looked at his mother, because it hadn’t occurred to him that he would be leaving her. Suddenly, swiftly, Derie kicked hard at his leg. He yelped and jumped out of the way. Behind her he saw Charles—he of the bruised face—wince, unsurprised but not unsympathetic.

“Don’t ever make me ask you anything twice,” she said.

“Yes, Derie,” he said, and ran.

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