

Chapter 6

Korey knocked on the princess's door, three distinct raps that echoed down the hallway. Eya opened the door moments later, her gaze sliding past Korey without hesitation to focus on Ian. Her smile struck Ian as vaguely predatory, and she cast her words over her shoulder without looking away from him.

"He is here, princess."

"I feel safer already." Ariannah's reply was muffled by the turnings of the room and her obvious distance from the door, but Ian heard the sarcastic underpinnings below the bubble-headed, little girl speech, now that he knew what to listen for. His jaw tightened. Eya spoke again, obviously to Korey, but still did not divert her eyes from him.

"The princess dismisses you. Attend to your other duties."

Ian couldn't see Korey's face, but there was an eloquent downward shift along his vertical lines that silently bespoke a not-unexpected deflation. There was a curt nod of his head, and he voiced his reply into the princess's chambers in a resigned tone as he turned back toward Ian and the hallway.

"As she wishes."

Then he brushed past, with an indistinct "Pardon, Sir Ian", and was gone. Eya motioned Ian to enter. He did, and once again found himself in uncertain territory. Ariannah was regarding herself before a full length mirror that Ian had not noticed the

night before, further along the wall from her changing screen.

Her reflection met his eyes, and a smile twitched her lips.

"And there he is. Isn't he handsome, Eya? And so capable looking?"

"Yes, princess. Quite so." Eya replied from near the door.

Ian decided to forego trying to be clever, and indeed any participation whatsoever, and went to the couch and sat down without comment. The moment spooled outward, and Ian's lack of engagement seemed to puncture the obviously conspiratorial mood between the princess and her handmaid. Ariannah fussed with her hair for a moment longer, while Eya finally closed door, still watching him.

"I am going to assume that you are in this together." He said finally.

Ariannah stopped fidgeting with her hair, and again met his eyes through the mirror. This time her gaze was devoid of merriment. She maintained her silence for a moment, and then spoke.

"Your grasp of the obvious remains unshaken."

"Then we can dispense with theater. At least while we are alone."

Ariannah looked away, focusing on herself in the mirror. Another moment passed, and then she responded.

"Fine. That's not nearly as entertaining, but evidently stupidity and luck are not so tightly intertwined within you as I thought."

"That's so kind of you to say."

Her gaze snapped back to him, and her anger flared into visible wavelengths.

"Fine! Again! I wish to be free to do as I please. What do you know of my life, grift-rat? Nothing! Not a single thing. What weighs on your shoulders? Shall I eat? Shall I cheat? What little thing can I do today that will impact almost no one? You know nothing." She spat these last, and looked away. A number of moments passed, and then she continued, not looking back at him.

"Nothing has changed. I hold the power to make or break you here. Your best interests lie with me."

"Yes, I understand that." He said slowly into the vacuum created by her previous statement, filling and dispersing it. "I merely wished to point out that your efforts to extend the cowl of your artifice into unnecessary areas are a waste of your energies."

Ariannah looked back at him finally, again through the mirror. In that look, there was an unwilling unveiling, so brief that Ian wished to dismiss it. Ariannah, in that slight sliver of a moment, was neither the twirling caricature, nor the self-indulgent tyrant. Ian's eyes widened as she resolved into a real

person for a negative segment of a second. Then her eyes hardened, crushing whatever had been.

"Fine, a third time. I won't bother. You will maintain our external fantasy, though. If you compromise it, your life is at an end. If you don't, then...you will gain what you gain. I have no interest in that."

She seemed to lose tension to an inner thought.

"Eya has her own objectives. As far as I am concerned, she is free to pursue them."

Ian frowned, having forgotten his initial accusation. But Ariannah gave him no chance to think any further about it. Her next imperial statement buried any other consideration.

"We are going to the Market. You will attend me."

Ian shrugged with little interest.

"As you wish, princess."

The absent busyness surrounding Ariannah's migration from the palace down into the city again swirled in and out as they moved, a practiced and expected dance that all participants save Ian were quite familiar with. Eya had left soon after the end of Ian and Ariannah's own little dance in her rooms, with seemingly no acknowledgement between her and the princess. On the surface, it seemed odd that she did not beg her leave, but then Ian

remembered the conversation earlier that morning when she had awoken him. He decided to let the implication go a second time. He was too tired.

After a momentary eternity in which Ariannah switched several pieces of adornment for several others, added a translucent drape about her shoulders, and then promptly tossed it onto a couch again in disgust, they left her apartments and made their way back down to the center court. Ian strode a step behind her and to the side, with his best hawkishly intent look on his face. Ariannah was in turns imperious, kindly, and dismissive with those peripheral participants that swept into her path and then out again, giving course corrections so that they might complete the arc of their individual purposes.

In the central court, they boarded the same carriage that had brought them up, complete with the same selectively indifferent footman. Ian noted that standing orders had not been completely overturned by his new appointment. Six mounted men, some of whom he recognized from the detail in Southward, were waiting to accompany the carriage. Ariannah made her fussings over the horses again. Ian decided this must be part of the dance as well, and waited without comment until she had finally entered the carriage. He followed, and settled into the cushions, awash with exhaustion and empty of stomach.

The journey back down the Queen's Road was mostly silent, and Ian did not have the same interest in the passing surroundings as the previous one. He was tired, hungry, and uncertain, and Ariannah had nothing to say this time, nor did he. He perked up a bit when the carriage left the Queen's Road for a street that angled away to the southeast. It was not a direct route to the harbor, but was still destined to arrive at the water if unobstructed or diverted. Traffic increased, and the carriage slowed, even with the mounted escort. At long last, the carriage halted in a large open square, and Ariannah made to exit. Ian spoke in low tones.

"What is your plan?"

She settled back into her seat, a not-ingenuine smile touching her lips for a moment.

"To shop. It's what I do. I'm here to be seen, and to participate."

"For how long?"

She sighed.

"Just follow my lead. Try to intersperse the fiendishly alert look with moments of smile and nod. My sense so far is that you are quite good at improvisation. If you actually aren't, then we are in trouble."

She exited the open carriage door. Ian followed. He found it much easier this time to not dwell on the shape of her backside.

The square was actually what amounted to a private entrance to the Market. Several other conveyances were parked nearby, though not quite as well-appointed or well-attended as Ariannah's. All of the buildings that lined the square seemed to be oriented outward, their back walls forming the hem of the square. The only break in the line of buildings besides the terminus of the road was a small break in the eastern wall. Soldiers stood at both openings. Ian got the sense that you did not arrive here or leave here if you did not occupy a specific, rarified section of the local socio-economic strata.

Ariannah strode purposefully toward what Ian now saw was an arched entrance to a much larger space through the eastern wall of the enclosure. He also noted that four of the mounted escorts were no longer so, their mounts taken by the other two to a far corner of the square where what were possibly stable entrances gloomed in darker shadows. They flanked Ariannah, and Ian as he followed behind her. There was no challenge from the soldiers at the archway, but the noise level rose considerably as they

passed from the relative quiet of the square into what was the largest open market Ian had ever seen, or indeed imagined.

It stretched away for what seemed impossible distances on all sides, the way before them stretching arrow-straight toward the center, the bounding city hazy and indistinct in all directions above the stalls. The press of participants roiled and surged, and the sound was less than a stone's throw from deafening.

Ariannah showed no hesitation in her passage, proceeding straight ahead, and Ian and her guard kept pace. Ian noted that the press of the crowd made clumsy way for her, and no one conducted business in unaffected obliviousness to her passage. Some called out to her, and others bowed, but almost every eye tracked her passage. The marketplace itself recognized her passage, bending and morphing to make way for her.

There were a number of structures visible above the tops of the stalls within the marketplace itself, but their construction and locations made them seem more like mapping points than constructs occupying any significant space in the vastness of the Market. A slender central obelisk constructed of highly polished dark stone pushed high into the sky, a circular crown of silver bristles radiating out in uneven lengths just below its pyramidal top. Gossamer lines of light undulated slowly in the slight island breeze moving across the city, connecting each

individual bristle tip along a downward weighted arc to the tops of the other structures. Each was defined and distinct without interruption, overlap, or interaction despite their ambient movement or the length of run to even their outermost destinations. These were the much shorter towers, constructed of the same stone, but with flat, open areas at the tops, bounded by iron railings and covered by metal cupolas. They seemed to be geometrically located along the expanding circle of the Market, though it was hard to tell given its scale. The closest of these allowed Ian to judge its height at about twenty feet, with a pair of figures dressed in Jared's colors periodically changing vantage points within the shaded area at the top. Just below the top, there were a series of slotted openings that seemed to wrap around the circumference of the tower, black without any hint of interior illumination.

At each intersection, Ian had looked both right and left in the interest of both looking alert, and also to try to internalize the immensity of his surroundings. While the path in front did not twist or turn, each right angle turning on each side seemed to angle away for a time, and then bend slowly out of sight. Those on the right bent slowly to the left, and those on the left bent toward the right, confirming the impression of concentric arcs radiating away from the center.

While the size of the Market was daunting, the individual stalls themselves were the most confounding elements for Ian. In Southward, none but those catering to the most well-to-do could afford to license use of the Mage-guild, so consequently most of the stalls were traditionally constructed of wood supports and canvas walls and roof. Here, at least along the avenue they currently traveled, there was none of that. Each stall simply ended where the next began, defined only by what it contained. But it was the contents and presentation that pushed Ian's anti-gawk veneer to its limit.

In one, a ten-foot high wall of water towered behind a long ironwood slab floating at waist height, varieties of fish schooling in its depths. As Ian passed by, he saw the man behind the floating counter nod in response to a patron's indicating finger, and pass a net into its depths. With practiced ease, he scooped out the desired wriggling item, and brought it out toward the counter. The spray of water thrown off by the fish's frantic movements fell not onto the floor, but directly back into the water wall.

In another, long drapes of exotic fabrics swirled in midair within the interior, making slow cyclic changes in color, texture, and reflective value. Overhead, unsupported circular fans pushed air into the interior.

The day was bright, but as Ian glanced into another, he had to squint to make out the contents. Despite the lack of a roof, the stall was dim and cloistered, with books and manuscripts piled high upon ornately wrought iron shelves. A cat twined between the legs of a browsing patron, and the proprietor brushed absently at the higher shelves with a duster.

At the front of each stall, whether set into a stone arched entrance, atop an iron stand, dangling on an unsupported chain, or floating in midair was the familiar red and gold placard of the Mage-guild, bearing the license and consumption rate in glowing letters on its face.

Ian decided that like so many other personally seismic experiences in the last two days, it was just better to not look too closely. He mentally shoved his wonder into a trouser pocket, and decided that people watching was not only easier to comprehend, it was also now his job.

Ariannah did stop occasionally, whether it was in response to a call or greeting, to view a particular tidbit, to mediate an argument, or even what seemed at first like random impulse. But as they moved further into the Market, Ian began to see the same pattern as when they were leaving the Palace. Ariannah changed her demeanor to fit each interaction, recommending a sought-after solution, delivering a sought-after mediation, and on several occasions imparting a seemingly irreconcilable

unwanted-yet-sought-after berating. The recipients of her attentions gave the impression of being stalled or stymied by the conflict or vacuum they faced, and her intervention allowed them to return to forward motion. Ian felt a begrudging admiration begin to press against his resentment towards her manipulations. He shoved that into the same trouser pocket.

It was during one of these protracted asides, while Ariannah negotiated a dispute between a volatile spice merchant and an irate restaurateur, that Ian received yet another seismic shock. He had been surveying the migrations of the crowd, both in and out of the surrounding stalls, and felt a stupendous jolt at the back of his mind, back where the only concern was existence and survival. His body twitched as the clarion blast blew into regions of higher thought and articulation, and Ian's gaze reversed its track back to the point of initiation, and focused. In the stall diagonally across from where he stood, he beheld what his primitive mind had recognized moments earlier.

The stall itself was unadorned, its interior clean, white, and lacking any discernable inventory. It consisted of a man sitting on a stool, intent upon a small, rectangular metallic plane floating before him. The entire back wall glowed with small, illuminated symbols and attached values organized in rows and columns. The values changed by the moment, though the symbols did not, and Ian recognized several as currency symbols.

That he realized he was seeing a Myr-Istia version of a money-changer's establishment was completely over-ridden by the fact that the other two men standing in it, staring out at him were Amil Kanter, and Pice. Both gazed at him without the slightest hint of surprise. The moment stretched for a bit, but contrary to every experience Ian had been through since the slip on the roof, he knew exactly what to do.

He turned to the four guards ranged behind him.

"Guard her. I've seen what may be a threat, but must make sure. She is in your hands right now."

He gave only a moment to see their reaction, which barely spanned the minute space between recognition and its opposite. The two furthest away did not even turn, both intent on happenings back the way they had come. Of the two facing him, only one met his gaze, raising one eyebrow at his statement. The other turned to one side and spat. It'll have to do, thought Ian.

He strode across the avenue, passing directly in front of the stall where Amil and Pice stood, moving purposefully, but slowly enough to feel their collective gaze track his passage. He went toward the center of the market, but turned left at the first intersection, and then entered the first vendor stall he came upon. Platters full of food and drink wafted this way and that, borne on tendrils of smoke. The interior was dim and

close, in full contradiction of the bright blue sky overhead. Behind the long bar at the rear, a large tapestry hung, its face swirling with depictions involving mostly smoke, fire, and conflict. The stall was full of patrons, and was sectioned off into small cubicles with a slim, tall table in the center, and no seating. People stood crowded around these, eating and drinking. Ian made a quick evaluation, and headed for the back corner, where the smallest cubicle was partially obscured by a thick wooden support, which of course didn't really support anything. He affected a slight stagger right before he crashed into his target table, coughing loudly as he ricocheted into the nearest of the five people crowded around the small table.

"Mmmmm. Oh, sorry, yeah?" Explosive fit of coughing, as he wormed his way deeper into the space. Protestations began in earnest from those in his path. He began to flail his arms about, talking just loud enough to over-ride the protests, but not loud enough to reach into adjoining spaces.

"Sorry. I'm not sick, trust me. One doc said Josian fever, but he was obviously an idiot, and the other one said that was almost unlikely. I'm really fine. Hey, I--." Another fit of coughing, and the cubicle emptied, the five patrons not stopping within the stall, but gone through the door despite the crowded interior.

Ian set his back against the wall of the small space that allowed an occluded view of the stall entrance, and waited. Amil and Pice entered, and made their way directly toward him, easing into the space opposite him across the table. There was a moment or two of silence as they stared at him, and he at them.

Amil Kanter was the definition of narrow, both in build and expression. He had a small shock of white hair atop a thin face, with a hatchet nose, and close-set eyes of the palest blue, like glacial ice. He was thin, and his limbs gave the impression of tending in toward themselves rather than protruding outward. Pice was his opposite, all darkness and pushing outward, imminent expansion momentarily frozen in a hulking delivery system. Ian had been in this audience before a number of times, but the sequence of events bookended between the last one and this stretched Ian's ability to maintain his equilibrium. He schooled his features with all of his might, and nodded.

"Amil." He said.

Amil's smile was no more than a slight lift at the corners of his mouth, as he returned the nod.

"Ian." His voice was as thin as he was, but audible enough, even in the murmur of the surrounding crowd. There was a moment of silence, and then he continued.

"Pice tells me you've...fallen...on good times since last we met."

"Cleverly put. Which is not like him at all."

Amil's smile this time was slightly more evident, though it didn't communicate humor. Pice showed no reaction.

"Perhaps that was my own turn of phrase after all. You of all people should know by now that the man is a verb, not an adjective. I, however, love words. And I've chosen just the right ones for you, I think. I will say that I have given it a great deal of consideration."

Ian decided to make one more go of it, knowing it was useless, but not sure what else to do.

"Amil, I tried to convince you before. Those weren't my papers, that wasn't my signature, and you should be talking to Armand instead of --." Amil cut him off with a slight wave of the hand.

"If it were simply a matter of your indiscretions while in my employ, you would be dead in the street out there, and your new taskmaster would need her hand-maid to wash your blood out of her garments. Come now, surely you've considered the implications of your recent... windfall? I certainly have."

Ian knew exactly where this was going though he'd not considered it at all, foolishly assuming that Amil would write him off as a bad debt. As the implications took root, Ian forced his face to stay neutral, knowing that showing anything except impassivity would sink him in the upcoming negotiations.

"The lower Ares is too small a pool for you."

Amil dipped his chin and raised one hand with a flourish in acknowledgement.

"And this move has been in the works for some time, though most of your generals have no idea, and are not accompanying the fleet to its new playground."

Amil raised his eyebrows at this. Then he nodded slowly, but didn't respond.

"I would have known, otherwise. And you have advanced your timetable because one of your errant pawns has... fallen into place."

Amil's grin was unmistakable this time. His white teeth gleamed as he clapped his small hands together a few times, though the sound didn't carry outside the stall.

"Spectacular. Lad, had you opted to stay your place, I may have eventually given you the keys to a small part of the kingdom." The grin died. "But, you didn't. And now here we are."

Ian felt time spooling out quickly. He needed to end this.

"I have to get back. I'm still alive, so you have plans for me. Why don't you tell me what they are, and I'll tell you whether I can accommodate, or whether we have a rather large problem."

Amil flapped a hand at Ian.

"As you say," he said, "There isn't time now. We will meet again soon, and I'll define the Ian arc in my story going forward." He threw his hands wide at this last, narrowing his gaze even further. "What a story it will be."

Ian clapped politely twice.

"Bravo. But ridiculous."

Amil frowned. Ian continued, grasping his fear by the throat and allowing it no purchase.

"I'm not the performing monkey anymore. The Fates have shifted, Amil, and I have power now. You threaten death, but you know only I can get you what you want here. I'm the pivot-piece, or you wouldn't be here. And I'm willing to help you get what you want, within reason. But I will need things from you, as well, if this is going to work. The old rules are out. I think you knew that though, coming here. I think that despite all the ground-work you may have laid, you understand that you need a key. As it turns out, I am that key. Otherwise, you'd have brought the whole crew, and tried to force the lock."

Amil's frown had morphed into a facial thundercloud, but Ian kept on.

"And my guess is that more powerful men than you have tried that here before, and have failed miserably. I have to go. If I'm wrong about this, then drop that hammer on me now." He indicated Pice with an extended finger. "Otherwise, leave a

method of contact with the proprietor of that money-changer's stall, and I will bring you something within the week, to show my good faith."

He made to exit the small space, but was stopped as Pice extended a beefy arm across his path, looking at Amil questioningly. Amil seemed to mentally work through a number of responses that would probably end Ian's life right there, arriving at the end of the process with a slightly less stormy expression on his face and a curt shake of his head. Pice removed his arm. Ian made to leave again.

"I will still write your story, monkey." Amil said.

"With just the right words, I'm sure."

Ian made his exit quickly, heart yammering in his chest. He made his way quickly back to where he'd left Ariannah, hoping against hope that her negotiations were still in progress.

His heart leapt as he saw the same four guards he'd left still standing in front of the same stall. Then he saw Ariannah standing there as well, and he heaved an inner sigh. Another price to pay. Her face both brightened and darkened as she caught sight of him, and he could see her bubble-headed persona balloon into motion.

"Ian! Where have you been? I've been so worried, so concerned! I was at a loss as to what to do, so I just waited here for you, even though Durkis here," she said, indicating the

single guard that had marked Ian's departure, "said that you would most likely catch up at some point, if you didn't get lost, or accosted, or beaten up. You said that, right?"

Durkis shrugged noncommittally as she turned to him for confirmation. She turned immediately back to him.

"Ian, I have to say that I don't feel very protected if you wander off like that."

Ian could hear the real Ariannah's threat under the twirling-girl speak.

"Highness, I am sorry. I did not count the cost to you for my disappearance. I perceived a possible threat, but it came to naught. I beg pardon."

Ian saw Ariannah contemplate further reprimands, but then she dismissed it with a slight wave.

"Very well. We are expected at the center soon. Please attend me."

"Yes Highness."

And they continued on into the Market.

They eventually arrived at the central market square, dominated by the obelisk and its filamented crown. The shops bordering the square were the most lavish and ostentatious, each

with twice the footprint of the surrounding stalls, and filled with wares and presentation that defied belief.

The base of the tower was ringed by a raised walkway about six feet high and three wide, with a large semi-circular platform jutting out at least twenty feet toward the bay side. Iron railings ran the circumference of the walkway and platform, punctuated by stone stair access at each side of the platform. Crowds drifted through the square, parting for Ariannah as she made her way toward the nearest stairway. There were already six of Jared's soldiers present bracketing the platform, and as they gained the top of the stairs, the men that had arrived with her fanned out to cover points within that perimeter. A large, intricately woven red carpet was inset into the stone at the center of the platform, and a slender ironwood post rose to a height of about five feet immediately in front of it. A small silver globe hovered just above the top of the post, glinting in the sunlight. Ariannah strode without hesitation onto the carpeted area, stopping just before the post. Ian followed her, but stopped a few steps behind in response to a tiny hand gesture from her.

There was a moment's pause, and then a musical chime filled the air, coming from everywhere at once. It repeated, and as the sound evaporated, the roar of the market did the same. For the first time since Ian had entered the market, there was silence.

All eyes were turned toward her. Ariannah spoke before the silver globe, and her voice filled the silence entirely, musical and compelling.

"Greetings citizens, friends, and travelers. Myr-Istia welcomes you to Market. I welcome you, and thank you for your patronage. May the Fates look kindly upon our commerce, and each of us as well."

Her words rang into the air. Ian looked out at the attending crowds, who were silent and attentive. He looked at the distant towers above their heads, connected to the obelisk by glowing filaments waving slowly in the island breeze. Then, something cast a momentary shadow across his vision. He glanced upward.

A large bird, dark against the blue sky, dropped like a stone across the face of the sun in a downward dive. It was a dark downward streak, and at its terminus was Ariannah. Ian blinked in surprise. Another bird? What the hell? He glanced around, but no one else seemed to have seen what he had.

"My father extends his regards to all as well, and reminds all participants that fair-exchange rules are in effect as of the end of last month."

He looked up again. The bird was dropping fast, with no change in direction. Ian lurched into motion, moving forward, trying to voice a warning, but was drowned out by Ariannah's

amplified voice. He could see he only had moments to intercept the avian missile. He gritted his teeth, and leapt into the air, hand raised to ward off the attack.

At the near apogee of his leap, Ian registered two shifts in his perception. Just before the bird plowed into his upraised hand, it winked out of existence. At the same instant, something slender, black, and on a different inbound trajectory blurred into being, passing through it. Only the last bit of his upward motion deflected it, pushing it up above Ariannah's head as it passed through errant wisps of her hair. An incendiary pain blossomed in his palm, and his entire arm was jerked violently backward, his forearm smacking Ariannah in the forehead as it did so. She was pitched backward with the impact as he was spun in a semi-circle before crashing to the stone, the object still trapped in his protesting flesh. He came to rest as the pain in his hand escalated, and he could see that it was a very large arrow. Only the dark, over-large fletchings had prevented it from passing through entirely, preventing it from forcing its way between the bones and out the other side. The shaft was much longer than a typical arrow, and the tip was small and metallic. Ian observed all of this as the silence of the market exploded into sound, and the surrounding soldiers into motion. As two of them dragged Ian to his feet and toward the tower, Ian could see Durkis preceeding four other soldiers with Ariannah boxed

between them, moving fast toward the tower's base. Durkis reached it, and slapped his palm against the stone.

A silver ring on his finger burst into red fire, and the stone before him disappeared in the shape of a doorway, an instant access into the interior. He entered, quickly followed by Ariannah's contingent. Ian passed through moments later, hustled through by the two half-carrying him. The arrow shaft in his hand banged on the edge of the portal as he passed through, and he felt a nauseating wave of pain rocket up his arm as he watched his own blood spatter to the ground from the wound. The instant they were through, the daylight behind them disappeared, though another, lower light source immediately replaced it as they all came to a halt inside the confines of the tower. Charm-globes flared alight in the small chamber as Ariannah's voice echoed in the enclosed space, her tone plaintive, but Ian could hear a slight undertone of exasperation through his recently adjusted filter.

"What happened? Is he hurt? Why did he --."

Durkis cut her off, at once curt and deferential as he spoke. His response echoed against the stone even as he knelt at Ian's side, the two carrying Ian having propped him up against the stone of the tower's exterior wall, just inside the now vanished doorway.

"Highness, your new Protector has just accomplished his hire. He has saved your life."

Ariannah said nothing more as Durkis evaluated Ian's wound. He spoke to Ian.

"Your pardon, Protector. I need to remove this before we return to the palace. It will likely hurt."

He gestured at another soldier, who produced a small axe from his belt, handing it quickly to Durkis. The same soldier looked quickly around, spied something, and then slid a small, loose stone toward Durkis with his foot from near their entrance point. Durkis deftly stopped its slide at Ian's side, and then gently repositioned Ian's damaged hand, placing the forward portion of the arrow shaft on the loose stone as blood continued to seep from the wound. Ian could see the writing on the wall, and looked away, closing his eyes and tensing as Durkis raised the axe.

The impact of the axe on the stone sheared through the arrow shaft, and the accompanying jolt of pain caused Ian to moan. He felt Durkis extract the remaining fletched stub from his palm in a quick motion, and then felt the man wrapping something around the damage. The pain made him feel sick, and he hoped that he wouldn't vomit. The feeling ebbed as Durkis stood, and helped Ian to his feet via his good hand. He looked intently at Ian as he placed Ian's good hand over his damaged one.

"Protector. Please put pressure on the wound as we go. It will help to staunch the flow until we reach the palace, and help. We must go."

Ian nodded, and the man gave a slight smile as he spoke quietly.

"I had no idea. I beg pardon."

Ian had no response as his mind whirled, and the pain buzzed angrily in his injured hand. He settled for waving the man forward with his interlocked hands, whatever direction that may be. He caught Ariannah's quizzical stare as the soldiers pushed them both into motion toward a descending stair at the center of the chamber. He also noted that Durkis had scooped up the two sections of the arrow, holding them tightly as he tossed the axe hilt-first back to its owner with his other hand.

Then they all moved down the stairway, and charm-lamps flared alight around them as they moved downward on the stair, illuminating as they passed, and fading behind them. They travelled in a moving bubble of light as they reached the bottom of the stair, and moved along a single level passage extending from the base of the steps, the light moving with them. After a short time, they entered a larger chamber that was oriented perpendicular to the passage. More charm-lights flared here, showing a wide platform abutting a metal railing with a single gap in the center, and a larger space beyond it. Ian could see

the wide dark openings of tunnel mouths at either end of the platform, beyond the railing.

His covering hand was wet with blood from the bandage, and his damaged hand throbbed, but the dislocation he had felt after his injury and subsequent movement had begun to clear. Ian could feel a slight wisp of air movement across the tunnel before them from right to left, and there seemed to be a sub-audible tremble growing in intensity from the same direction.

The group assembled before the gap in the railing, and in only a few moments a long, flat, open tram with bench seating in the front section, and a large unobstructed area in the rear came to a stop before them, bounded by a low, illuminated wall with a single metal rail atop it. The deceleration evident in just the short section of visible track before them indicated to Ian that the cart had been travelling at a terrific speed prior to arriving at their location, though it slowed easily to a dead stop before them. They moved quickly onto the tram, Ian and Ariannah pressed together onto the central bench, surrounded by soldiers. Durkis sat quickly on the bench in front of them, and put his hand on the rail. His ring flashed red again, and the tram whirred easily into motion again, picking up speed. There wasn't much sense of acceleration though the illumination provided by the interior of the tram cast enough light to show that the encapsulating tunnel was now passing by at a tremendous

rate. The amount of marvels that Ian had been exposed to in recent events made it slightly easier to accommodate this new truth. He turned to Ariannah.

"Where are we?"

She turned to him in response to his question, and he could see that she had questions of her own forming as she opened her mouth, her eyes troubled. She began, but her eyes must have seen the pain in his face, and he watched her gaze fall to his clasped hands. She stopped. She said nothing for a few seconds.

"We are in the Drain." She said finally, speaking evenly, obviously suppressing to some extent the emotions she felt. "It is the Myr-Istia underground. It is called so because it moves outward and downward from the Palace below the ground. It services all of the city, allowing the movement of goods and supplies without clogging the surface streets, especially the Market.

"Obviously the Palace is supplied by it as well, which sort of belies the name. But then, I didn't name it, so there you go."

Ian nodded, but said nothing, consumed by the pain in his hand.

Moments passed, and then Ariannah spoke again.

"What did you do up there?"

"I don't know." He said, honestly.

"Don't be ridiculous!" She said, but in a voice only he could hear, even though Durkis before them and the soldiers behind were so close. Her voice was low but intense. "Durkis says you saved my life. All I know is that you knocked me down during an important address. What happened? Does it have anything to do with what you saw earlier?"

Ian had a hard time thinking around the pain he was feeling, and was also confused by events, but it was clear to him that he had actually just saved Ariannah's life for the second time, whatever the circumstance. Third time, if you counted their first encounter, which he really didn't. But this time, it was a spectacularly public event. This was gold. He quashed the temptation to add some back-story to it. It was unnecessary.

"No. That was something else. Nothing, actually."

She waited for a few moments, until she saw that nothing else was forthcoming. Then she raised her voice, her hesitancy barely able to belie her aggravation.

"I need to know what happened. Please. Durkis?"

There was only a slight pause, and then Durkis responded, though he continued to look forward into the onrushing darkness as the tram moved up a definite slope. Ian could feel himself pressed further back against the short backrest.

"Your pardon, Highness. I was hoping to reach the Palace before I was required to give account, as I don't have an entire answer for you."

"Incomplete is fine, and understandable."

"Yes. Well, that was an assassination attempt."

A pause.

"What?"

"An assassination attempt. And it only failed because the Protector intervened, Highness. This was meant for you." He said, and held up the two parts of the arrow still clutched in his hand, even as he concentrated his attention toward the front of the tram, the ring on his other hand still pressed to the metal of the rail.

Another pause.

"How is that possible?" She replied, her voice shaky. "We have all the high ground in the Market. Where could that have come from?"

Durkis hesitated in answer, but then spoke.

"The edge of the market, Highness. The place we have decided that no threat could be mounted. I have overheard outlander tales of a weapon that might do what obviously has been done here, but I discounted the telling because it would require a Mage's participation. And the King controls all Mages, so..."

Ariannah remained quiet as the tram began to slow, entering a cavernous space that lit with charm-light as the tram eventually halted at a platform similar to their departure point, but much larger. There were several large tunnel openings leading away from the platform itself, and each glowed with internal illumination from the vantage point of the tram.

Before anyone made to disembark, Ariannah spoke.

"That is troubling, Durkis. No, that is deeply troubling, and I think that my father will want to know about it pretty much right now." There was no hesitancy in her voice now.

Durkis stood, and exited the tram, casting his reply over his shoulder as he moved.

"Agreed, Highness. I will carry the news. Will you accompany the Protector to the chambers of the First, or shall I call an escort? His wound needs attention."

Her reply was immediate.

"I will take him. Present your report."