

**Autumn**  
**The Palace**



Silence filled Keladon's ears as he crossed the threshold into the chamber. His intuition told him the true purpose of the two men who'd summoned him had naught to do with curing the presumed infertility of the king or queen.

The two men waiting in the chamber wanted him for something else.

After Keladon stepped fully into the chamber, the servant manning the door from the outside swung it shut behind him. For a moment, the only sounds came from a fire crackling to his left and rain outside the windows high on the wall to his right. A man then spoke, his voice quiet and creaking with age. "Please lock the door, Your Illustriousness."

Keladon looked behind him. A ring bearing a dozen keys dangled from one positioned in the door's lock. He turned the key halfway, then moved closer. The zone of Blocked Sound encompassed the bolt and the inner mechanism of the lock. He rested the fingertips of his free hand near the lock, straddling the narrow crack between the door and the jamb. A final twist of the key drove the bolt fully into the jamb and sent confirming vibrations to his fingertips.

Five paces from the door, the two men waited for him. To the left, clad in the simple brown doublet and tan breeches of a prominent commoner, sat Melos. At his neck hung a medallion showing a pillar holding up a crown, the emblem of his position as Master of Offices. He had a full head of white, close-cropped hair and a face wrinkled like old parchment. His gray eyes, however, remained clear under heavy lids that showed he saw everything and forgot nothing. Melos was a crafty old man, in office under three kings, survivor of a civil war and untold numbers of conspiracies. No one loved him, and all feared him. A few murmured words to his clerks, and the palace guard or the King's Justice could carry anyone to a dungeon cell, or the headsman.

Sweeping red motion came toward him from the right. Norobom, Duke of Vonen-Kiget, stood tall and broad, with untamed blond hair and expressive brown eyes. He wore the asymmetrical gray coat of a battlemage: the right panel slanted from a few buttons near the throat to a single button at the left hip, and a rounded shape bulged under the coat over the lower right abdomen. Like all other noble

battlemages, he declined the right due his station to wear a sword in the palace. Distinctive to Norobom was a red cape, held in place at his neck by a golden clasp embossed with a circle-with-a-handle depiction of a magegem. Also distinctive was his aura of assured command. Even those who did not know him guessed he was Commander of Battlemages.

Keladon bowed his head slightly. "Good afternoon, Your Grace."

Norobom gave a wide smile and swept his arms around Keladon, then slapped him on the back. "Good to see you, old friend." His voice echoed despite the thick, ornamented wallpaper lining the walls. "I still think fondly of our campaign together. Would we could ride into battle again and burn down our enemies, side by side."

The other's reference to the campaign against the Peluraki froze Keladon's face into a polite, artificial smile. "I too have fond memories from that time." He disengaged from Norobom's embrace. "Sir, and goodman Melos, shall we get to our business, before the yellow magegem fueling Block Sound spends all its energies?"

Norobom frowned for a moment. "Melos's palace mages have many more yellows in the vault... and they are irreplaceable." With his left hand, he reached into his jacket and pulled out a glassy, yellow ball with a flattened base and a handle on top. He set the yellow magegem on the floor to the left of his chair, then sat, flinging up his cape's hem of golden thread over his chair back. He waved at another chair facing him and Melos. "Take a seat, if you please."

He sat. From the way the light from a chandelier overhead and the fireplace to the side colored the yellow magegem, Keladon estimated the charge remaining in it. He compared that with the charge drained by Block Sound each second, and calculated the spell could run another forty minutes. Norobom went on. "Our summons was a false pretense to bring you to the palace."

Annoyance at being compelled to leave his peaceful researches at his estate and journey hundreds of miles washed through Keladon, but he kept his face still.

"I see you already guessed," Norobom said. "Of course it's true the king and queen have no children, but as best we know, both are fertile."

"Then what could my magic do?" Keladon asked.

Another smile from Norobom. "It's not your magic we need."

“What, then?”

Norobom turned to Melos. “Goodman, would you tell our guest our purpose here?”

“We need a man,” Melos said, “a man of noble blood and the utmost discretion, to perform a task of the highest importance for our realm.” His eyes narrowed to peer at Keladon. “Sir, we ask that you impregnate Queen Lilera.”

Gooseflesh stippled Keladon’s cheeks. Impregnate the queen!? Feelings churned inside him for a moment, until his mother’s last warning to him, always in the back of his mind, settled them. *Avoid the intrigues around the palace. Never give your half-brother any reason to doubt your loyalty.*

After a couple of quick, shallow breaths, he breathed deeply and kept his voice assured. “I should think that would be a duty for King Raboros.”

Norobom laughed. His baritone voice echoed off the plastered walls. “Discrete as ever, old friend! You must know His Majesty’s tastes run counter to nature. Everyone in the palace does.”

Outside, a gust of wind threw raindrops like handfuls of pebbles against the windows. Keladon huddled his shoulders. “I knew his desires inclined toward boys, but I have been away from the court for nearly twenty years.”

“Have you reason to think his tastes have changed?” Melos asked.

“Since I inherited the estate of Korobei, I have heard nothing about where King Raboros now seeks his pleasure. Yet even if he took no pleasure at getting the queen with child, I would think him man enough to undertake the duty.”

Norobom sniffed out a disdainful breath. “You think too highly of him.”

“Sir—” Melos said sharply.

“Can he hear us in here?” Norobom looked down his long nose at Melos, and a sudden brightening of the fire reflected from the skin over his sharp cheekbones. “No. Let us speak frankly, then. King Raboros is addicted to his pleasures and scorns the fundamental duty of a king. It’s his fault alone we’re forced to ask Keladon to stand in for him.”

“Duke Norobom’s words are intemperate,” Melos said to Keladon, “but they speak to the underlying truth. Your half-brother consummated his marriage on his wedding night, and perhaps five or

six times over the following year; but after your father the late king entered the hall of Balar and Samala, he has not once lain with the queen, despite all our entreaties that he do so.”

Keladon’s aplomb had mostly returned. “Why is now the time for a champion to perform the deed on his behalf?” he asked. “The queen is only thirty-five.”

“Both the royal midwife and Queen Lilera’s attendants have made clear her tides of Samala come and go erratically, more rapidly than is usual for her age,” Melos said. “The midwife predicts the goddess will finally ebb the tide within five years.”

“And the longer we wait, the greater the likelihood she would bear a lackwit,” Norobom said. The rain came down harder, rattling on the cobblestoned walkways in the palace’s central courtyard outside the windows.

Keladon gritted his teeth. Better to find someone else to do it. “Your words are true, goodman and sir, but only regarding Queen Lilera. The king could petition the priests of Balar for a divorce, on some ground, true or not—”

“We have considered that approach,” Melos said. A breath sagged out of him and his shallow chest sank further under his simple doublet. “Matters of state make it too complicated to pursue. The Peluraki king would protest if Raboros cast aside his sister.”

Norobom snorted, waved his hand. “The Peluraki are toothless. Let them squawk. We slaughtered them twenty years ago, didn’t we, Keladon? We can do it again.”

Chill gripped Keladon as Melos glowered at Norobom. “Since then the Peluraki have found magegem caches—”

“—we still have better battlemages—”

Keladon eased back in his seat, grateful their argument focused them on each other. Twenty years ago, he had been a different man. Never again would he wield the reds of the battlemages. Never again would powerless men fall by the thousands to energies flung from his fingertips.

“—and finding another wife for King Raboros would not solve this problem,” Melos said. Norobom glumly settled into his seat. The old man turned to Keladon. “He would refuse to do his duty with the next wife as well, which would put us against this same impasse in another twenty years.”

“I see.”

After a silence, a crumbling log rustled in the fireplace. Melos went on. "Keladon, you are our realm's acknowledged master of the peaceful uses of magic. Know you some magic to aid us?"

Norobom leaned forward and vigorously shook his head. "I tell you, there is none."

"Duke Norobom, your mastery is of red and yellow magegems, is it not?"

"I am aware of spells requiring the other colors," Norobom said with a glower at Melos, "though I lack the fullness of my old friend's knowledge." He swept his hand toward Keladon, then leaned forward, his brown eyes intent. "There is no way to make King Raboros a man whose spine stiffens when he thinks what lies twixt a woman's legs, is there?"

Would there were. "The Jaloreans charged the magegems with no such spells," Keladon said. "Nor have I or my assistants crafted such a spell from the commands we have learned."

"As I told you, Master of Offices," Norobom said.

Keladon thought more, and raised his hand with a feeling of sudden relief. "I can give some of my assistants the task of studying whether such a spell is possible, and composing it if it is." It might be a waste of part of the annual allotment of magegems granted him by his late father's will, but it could keep him free of this palace intrigue after all.

Melos leaned toward Norobom. "If His Illustriousness believes such a thing might be possible—"

"We shouldn't chance it." Norobom pouted and shook his head. "Even were it possible, we can't know the spell to make the king into a man could be prepared in time before the queen's womb rusts over."

Stiffly, Melos settled back in his armchair. Candles around the room and the fading fire shadowed the deep lines of his face. "I know spells exist that can force a man to do a mage's bidding," he said.

"Compel Truthful Answers is the only one we know," Keladon said.

Melos frowned. "Is it? A blue magegem carries within it the power to make rats dance and cats swim. How is a man different from such a beast?"

Keladon felt another moment of hope, but his knowledge of

Guide a Creature's Movements welled up from his memory and crushed his hope. "The stronger an animal's mind, the more energy the spell would have to draw from the magegem to overpower it. A man's mind would consume a fully charged blue magegem within a few seconds."

"In the vault, we have enough blue magegems," Melos said.

"But as our guest reminded us when he entered, the stock is limited," Norobom said. "The Jeloreans took the ability to make and charge magegems to their funeral pyres, and we haven't yet learned that ability from the codices they left behind." He jerked his gaze to Keladon. "Have you proven me wrong, old friend?"

Keladon shook his head. "We have hypotheses of how to charge magegems, but no proof."

"Making more magegems can be a task for another day," Melos said. "King Raboros needs an heir now."

Norobom jumped to his feet and lifted his shoulders and chest. "Keladon is right about the limited number of blues, but he left out the key objection. Are you fool enough, old man, to guide the king's movements against his will? What sovereign could tolerate the shame of being enslaved, if even for a few minutes, by a lesser man? After you exhausted every blue in the vault, the king would regain his powers, and then have you and the mage hanged near to death, then resuscitated in order to hang you again."

Melos leaned back. "You both speak wisely. Magic will not help us."

Norobom flipped up the tail of his gold-trimmed crimson cloak as he sat. "Only you can, Keladon."

Keladon glanced past the two courtiers to the wall behind them. There hung an equestrian painting of his father, handsome and resplendent, a young duke pursuing the throne in the interregnum following the death of Larabos IV, the son-less king. "Noble blood and discretion, you said, Master of Offices? I can't be the only man with both."

"You have the most noble blood of all," Norobom said in a commanding tone. "The blood of a king."

"A king," Keladon said, "who came to the throne because one unmarried daughter survived Larabos IV, and a clash of arms with the girl's other suitors had to give someone the throne. My father was born to inherit a dukedom. So too were you, Norobom. Do you



wish to take Raboros' place in the queen's bedchamber?"

Briefly, Norobom's eyes bulged, but his usual expression of confidence and power soon returned. "Your father made himself a king. That makes his blood even more royal than if he'd happened to be born a son of old Larabos."

*Find someone else to get Queen Lilera with child.* Murky fears of conspiracies pushed Keladon's back against the chair and froze his tongue.

"As for discretion," said old Melos, "if you delivered this stroke of state, would you tell a soul you were our next prince's true father?"

He could lie and say he would... in which case he knew too much already. He would not leave this room alive. But even without that cold calculation, he would have told the truth. "I would not. I am loyal to King Raboros."

"But what if a foe, say, King Aril of the Peluraki, were to capture you, and his mages Compelled you to give Truthful Answers?" Melos peered at him.

Keladon grimaced. "I would resist until the pain from telling falsehoods overwhelmed me. Being a mage would not shield me from that spell. But they would have to have some suspicion about the next prince's true father to capture me, let alone ask me the question. I would not give them any reason for suspicion. Would you, Master of Offices? Or you, Commander of Battlemages?" Keladon put as much steel into his gaze as he could and swept it between the two courtiers.

"I am loyal to King Raboros," Melos said.

"As loyal as you," Norobom said to Keladon.

Another rustle of a crumbling log, and glowing embers drifted up the chimney, entrained in the hot air of the fire. Keladon asked, "What does Queen Lilera think of your plan?"

Norobom sniffed out a breath. "Our Peluraki prisoner will do as she's told."

"We have broached the subject with her," Melos said. "She consents. She has known from a young age she was fated to bear a child for reasons of state. The men of the Peluraki royal house trained her well."

"She could give her Peluraki kinsmen knowledge of her child's true father," Keladon said. "What mischief could they work with

that?" Maybe this objection would free him from their intrigue. Tension eased from his chest and shoulders.

Melos shook his head. "We let her receive and send letters to King Aril and other Peluraki personages. We of course read what comes in and, if needed, rewrite what goes out. When she meets with a Peluraki emissary, or any of her brother's subjects who wish to pay her their respects, she is attended by a multitude of servants, at least two of whom are agents of mine fluent in her native tongue. If she speaks the wrong word to a visitor, my agents would run the visitor through in front of her. The Peluraki will not learn her child's father is a man other than King Raboros."

"Of course," Keladon said. He heard the resignation in his voice.

"You seem unwilling to do this task for us." Melos frowned. "Like your half-brother, do your tastes run contrary to nature?"

"Don't insult our guest," Norobom said.

Keladon replied to Melos, "My tastes are those of most men."

The old man looked unconvinced. "We know you have fathered no children."

Melos' words rubbed at a sore spot in Keladon's mind. Though no prince, he was still the son of a king, legitimized by his father, and granted a lifehold on the small but prosperous estate of Korobei. "You know I have never married. After my father claimed me, I could not take a wife from the lesser nobility. To take a wife from the highest born would enmesh me against my better judgment in my in-laws' intrigues."

With a laugh, Norobom said, "You make not marrying sound a bad thing." His smile turned to a puzzled look, crinkled eyebrows and a deep crease across his forehead. "But we spoke of children, not marriage. You must vent the pressure in your groin somewhere, wife or no, and if seed falls on fertile ground, it will sprout."

"I have needs like any man," Keladon said, "but no desire to father bastards." He would not wish a child to grow up facing the scorn he had encountered in his youth. "In one of the villages near Korobei works an artisan skillful at making assurance caps from lamb entrails."

"Then why do you squirm in your seat to avoid answering us with 'yes?'" Norobom asked. "Forget your village harlots and foolish peasant girls. You can plow the furrow of a queen!"

Keladon let out a breath. His last line of defense was a bluff.

“There is a spell other than Compel Truthful Answers that could disrupt the secrecy this scheme needs. Have you heard of a spell castable using a green, Scald the Cuckoo’s Egg?”

Melos squinted in thought. “A petty earl, from near the Pelurak border... what was his name?”

“Hardly important,” Norobom said. “A year ago, give or take? Through that spell, he found the son born to his young wife wasn’t his. He killed her, then raised her adultery as a defense when her relatives had him summoned by the King’s Justice.”

Keladon’s hopes shrank. All would depend on how much they knew of the ingredients of that spell. “My point should be clear. Through magic, one can find a child is not sired by his putative father, and disfigure that child for the rest of his life, for all the world to see. Should that spell be turned onto the next prince—”

“Pardon me, old friend,” Norobom said with an air of theatrical innocence. “I don’t know all the details, and perhaps I’m mistaken, but doesn’t that spell require an ingredient from the putative father?”

His bluff had been called. Keladon took a deep breath, then rested his forearms on the arms of his chair. His gut felt exposed, but he refused to cover it with his hands. “It does.”

Melos peered at Norobom and Keladon. “What ingredient? Don’t hold this information from me.”

“Yes, Keladon,” Norobom said, smiling. “Tell us both.”

A deep breath failed to still Keladon’s unease. “It requires the putative father’s semen.”

Norobom smirked and leaned back in his chair. Melos gave Keladon a dispassionate look. “Raboros would not deliver his semen to a mage capable of casting that spell. You are bookish, and from that I could guess you were perhaps a fool about people’s minds, but I am certain you know your brother would not give another the power to destroy his legitimacy and that of his dynasty.”

“I know it.”

“Finally you speak bluntly,” Melos said. “Now, tell us, why do you resist our request? The kingdom needs an heir. You are the best man to provide it one.”

Melos was right. The last king to die without an heir had left behind a chaos that was mercifully short-lived, thanks to an alliance between Keladon’s father and the first men to tap the rediscovered power of the magegems. But now, four decades later, so many mages

had been trained, and so many scattered vaults had been found throughout the kingdom, that another interregnum would descend into bloody stalemate, benefiting only foreign kings, and vultures.

“Provide it one?” Norobom asked from deep in his chair. He shifted forward with a lively grin. “Or be one?”

Sweat dewed on Keladon’s forehead and nape. “What do suspect me of, sir?”

“Suspect? Old friend, fear not. You know we cannot be overheard. No one will take my words as indication you conspire against the king. All I mean is you and the king are the only claimed sons of old Radobom. If the king died without a surviving son, some faction among the nobility would settle the crown on you by default.”

“I would not want it.”

“Oh?” Norobom said, eyebrow raised. “Truly?”

His feelings roiled, but Keladon pushed them down and gazed levelly at Norobom. “Truly.”

Sadness filled Norobom’s face. “Then the blood of the kingdom would be on your hands.”

“How? I do not follow you.”

“Enough of the ambitious would bend their knee to a claimed son of Radobom to maintain the kingdom’s peace.”

“Claimed? Who would declare a bastard his king? Would you?”

Norobom’s breezy confidence flickered for a second, then returned to the fore. “Old friend, most of the highest born have as little mettle for a civil war as the basest peasant. But if the throne had no heir, a dozen of the highest born would vie for the empty throne with large armies and thousands of reds. Civil war would despoil provinces and send tens of thousands to their pyres. Would you want that?”

Scholars working at his estate, and goodmen plying their trades in the nearby towns, came to Keladon’s inner eye, suffused with the golden glow of autumn sunsets and turning leaves. “No,” he said. “I want prosperity for the kingdom, but I do not want the crown.” A new thought troubled him, but it would not be enough to free him from their plans. “I will bed Queen Lilera as you ask... provided the king himself tells me he approves.”

Melos’s eyes briefly widened. “Why should that be necessary, sir?”

“As you recall, I grew up in the palace. I saw men convinced they acted with royal favor end up at the headsman.”

“You fear King Raboros would consider you getting the queen with child to be an intrigue against him?” Melos said. “He approves both our plan and your role in it.”

The fire had faded. Embers glowed at the bottom, but only a few lazy tongues of flame licked over the shriveled, blackened logs. “So you say.”

“You don’t trust us?” Norobom asked. “I can understand you not trusting Melos—only a fool would—” He smiled arrogantly at the Master of Offices. The old man responded with a look barren of feeling. Norobom spoke further. “—but Keladon, you and I trained side by side, campaigned side by side, and toppled towers and slew Peluraki side by side.”

Keladon let the words fade before replying. “Twenty years ago.”

Norobom’s eyes narrowed as Melos spoke. “Very well. If that is all you require, King Raboros will assure you of his will with his own words.”

Hinges groaned and brass pulls squeaked against their brackets as two footmen opened the double doors leading into King Raboros’ lesser audience chamber. A herald waiting with Keladon took two steps into the chamber, thumped the padded end of his walking stick against the hardwood floor, and bowed. The herald spoke the formulaic words requesting a nobleman’s admittance in a deep, booming voice.

Despite the herald’s entry, conversations went on, and someone within the audience chamber laughed. The sound echoed off the high walls and ceiling. “His Illustriousness is admitted,” came a bored reply.

Keladon’s rarely-worn sword bounced against his hip as he entered. He had practiced swordsmanship for many hours in his youth, but he only carried it now as a badge of rank. Tall windows to his left let in the light of a sunny but cold afternoon. Across the central courtyard of the palace rose the west wing and the gray stone keep of the old castle behind it. The sun’s bright rays caught the contours of the audience chamber’s textured wallpaper and a massive painting of Keladon’s father, regal yet fleshy with middle age and

decades of rich living, accepting the submission of Peluraki emissaries in baggy, mud-stained tunics at the end of the war.

The doors thudded shut behind him.

Below the painting, ranked daises bore a collection of standing men. Melos and Norobom were among them, along with two palace mages wearing blue doublets and empty magegem slings at their hips. Also present were two hard-eyed men wearing baggy, plain doublets whom Keladon took to be Melos' agents.

Keladon did not know the others by either name or role. Most were young and slender noblemen, with rouged cheeks and curly hair. Their dapper attire took the eye away from Norobom's customary red cloak. Their swords had ornate basket hilts with gold filigree and emplaced jewels, and their doublets, brightly patterned, had multiple slashings revealing flounced sleeves.

Some of the noblemen gave him scornful looks tinged with wariness. Keladon read their sentiments out of long habit: a bastard, but sired by the late king, and slayer of more men in an hour than a pretty sword could pierce in a lifetime. Unexpectedly, though, some gave him a look of appraisal, flicking up and down his body, such as other men gave bawds and serving maids. Keladon ignored them until they returned their attention to uppermost dais, and the man seated in the room's only chair.

The circlet crown lay aslant King Raboros' brow. Keladon had not seen his half-brother in over fifteen years, and studied him as he took slow steps into the room. He could not remember Raboros' past appearance with any exactitude, but he must have looked more vigorous than he did now. Middle age had worn him down faster than their father. His nose looked thick, jowls sagged under his jaw, and wrinkles splayed from the corners of his eyes. His hair looked as black as dyed leather, so falsely colored it emphasized, not refuted, the features showing his age. A bulky purple doublet, slashed in two dozen places and puffed with silk, hid Raboros's torso, but when he shifted his weight, it became clear he had added perhaps two stone of weight over the years. He watched Keladon with an expression of mild distaste.

*Are you annoyed I ask a favor of you, half-brother?*

A long, narrow table, its surface incompletely covered with a black velvet cloth, had been set across most of the room's width. Various objects had been lain on it. Keladon glanced over them to

confirm Melos' palace mages had done as he'd asked.

Two magegems, one blue and one green, sat just to the left of the table's center. He envisioned the fingers of his left hand curling up and around the handle of each one in turn. The blue was a rich, deep azure, untouched or nearly so by any mage in the thousand years since its charging. Not so the green; it had faded to the color of moss growing high on the shaded slopes of hills. Whether a Jelorean or some more recent mage had tapped its stored energies he could not say. A glance told him it would have enough remaining power to work the demonstration that was the official purpose of this visit.

The objects on the table other than the magegems would be acted on by the energies he would tap. Two earhorns, a pair of hand mirrors, a pot of soil about nine inches in diameter and a foot high, and a cut white rose with six inches of stem. A large water jar stood next to the table. The water surface lay only a few inches below the rim. The jar stood two feet high and a foot and a half in diameter, with long rope handles slack against the sides.

Keladon stopped at the table, glad for the distance it imposed between him and Raboros' hangers-on. He bowed the proper distance. "I thank you for extending me this courtesy, Your Majesty."

"Our predecessor on this throne granted you an annual allotment of magegems in his final testament. It is fit you show us spells you may work with them." Raboros idly waved his fingers. "Proceed."

"First, I shall demonstrate *Grow From a Cutting*." Keladon picked up the rose stem with his right hand, deftly avoiding its thorns. He plunged the stem's cut end into the pot of fresh soil. "I will need—" He eyed the water jar, guessed its weight, glanced around for servants. "—two strong footmen to add water, slowly and steadily, when I give the word."

Two bulky servants strode forward. Though broad-shouldered, their tight faces, and the faint slap of water against the jar's wall, revealed they struggled with the jar's weight.

Keladon reached for the green with his left hand. The glass was smooth and cold. His fingers curled around the handle until he could feel it in the proper position against his fingers.

"*Jojipo bobi yuloto*," he told the magegem in Jelorean. *Attend me.*

The green grew slightly warmer. He closed his right thumb and forefinger around the rose's stem and continued speaking in Jelorean. "*Target your energies upon the rose I touch.*" The rose

shimmied for a moment. “*Grow the target, flux three-hundredths of a boil per drop of time, begin.* Start pouring water,” he said to the footmen, “with a flow no stronger than your first urine of the morning.”

The footmen tipped the water jar toward the planted stem. They poured it steadily for a few seconds, then sloshed water over the pot of soil and onto the table runner and Keladon’s hand. One of them gasped in surprise. The stem had begun to grow.

“Mind your task,” Keladon said. The footmen steadied the jar and the flow grew even again.

Stalks sprouted from the stem, and soon turned into stems themselves. Leaves feathered out, elongated, twisted to show themselves to the windows. The main stem thickened, gently pushing Keladon’s thumb and forefinger apart. He touched his little finger to a growing stem, then waited for an opportune moment to release his hold on the main cane and quickly grasp another, closer to the growing rose bush’s periphery. The air around the bush turned hotter and more humid.

The footmen’s job grew easier as the water jar neared empty. From his spot to the side of the dais, Melos stood taller and peered at the pot. “Where is all the water going, sir?” he asked. “You have poured in enough to soak the soil.”

“The plant consumes water as it grows,” Keladon said, “and releases more through its leaves.” A drop of sweat ran down his forehead into his eyebrow. He kept his gaze on the growing rose bush as he spoke. The first flowers began to bloom. “Stop pouring. *Stop growing the target, no flux. Release the target. Release your attention from me.*”

The handle of the magegem instantly cooled. Keladon removed his hands from the magegem and the rose bush. As he withdrew his hand from the rose bush, a thorn caught it. A drop of blood welled amid the distended veins and fine hairs on the back of his hand.

He stepped back and bowed. “The spell is complete, Your Majesty.”

Raboros studied the rose bush for a moment. An uncertain expression passed his face. “A clever trick, certainly.” His voice trailed off.

A young man wearing a paisley doublet with an open pane over the heart stepped forward, his face mirthful. “Your Illustriousness,”



he said, drawing out the uncommon and relatively low style of address, “you have worked a barren miracle. You have created roses for us, but we lack any fair ladies to give them to.” He angled his head from side to side, inviting laughter at his jape. Most of the other young men gave it.

“Fear not, Dobak,” Raboros said. “We shall bestow our guest’s bounty on our well-formed lads.” Another round of laughter followed. “Who here merits a rose?”

Arms rose to form a barren forest of rich fabric and puffed silk. Voices babbled out, “I do,” “me,” “clearly I—”

“We hear each one of you,” Raboros said. He turned to a short, slender footman. “Have you garden shears handy?”

The footman’s eyes widened and he quickly, deeply bowed. “I do not, Your Majesty.”

“You knew a mage would work a trick with a flower from our garden, and yet you failed to provide garden shears?” A vein of anger lay within the king’s voice.

Keladon winced with sympathy for the footman. *I told no one what spell I would work.* He leaned forward and opened his mouth, wanting Raboros to see he needed to speak. The king’s glower remained on the bowing servant.

“Your Majesty,” the footman said, “I shall send a houseboy to fetch a pair as quickly as he can.”

“Do so.” The footman backed toward a swinging door at the side of the room. “When we have a pair of shears, Dobak shall select be the first to select his rose, followed by....” Raboros reeled off a half-dozen names. “What shall we do, lads, while we wait for our servants to do as they’re told?”

Dobak bowed to the king and set his hand amid the ruffles of his shirt over his heart. “I have a question for our guest, Your Majesty.”

“You may ask it,” Raboros said, and picked up a wine goblet.

Dobak turned an imperious gaze on Keladon. “Grateful as I am to His Majesty for his munificence in granting me the first fruit of your effort, a rosebush seems a trifling way to waste some of our irreplaceable magegems. I should think Sodelerak has enough roses.”

Before replying, Keladon glanced at Raboros. The king seemed not to see the goblet still in his hand, seemed not to hear the conversation. Keladon’s hand drifted to the outside of his sword’s

plain steel basket hilt. “The rose bush merely demonstrates the power of Grow From a Cutting.”

“Have you used this demonstration on the tavern wenches in the towns near your estate?” Dobak asked.

Keladon swallowed thickly. “My purpose here was to work a spell with results readily discernible to all—”

“—meaning, even those as ignorant and foolish as us?” Dobak asked. “Is that what you think of us?” He swept his arm to take in all the men in the room except for the servants, Melos, and Norobom. The angle of his elbow showed he included Raboros.

Keladon blinked, and sweat formed on his nape. “—discernible to those who serve our kingdom in ways other than working with magegems.” His words sounded stiff.

Raboros slumped against the side of his throne, with heavy eyelids and his chin propped on the heel of his upturned hand. “Yes, yes. But Dobak has a good question. What value comes from making rose bushes?”

“The spell applies to all vegetable matter, Your Majesty.” Keladon breathed more calmly. With that clarification, Raboros should see the value in it.

Instead, the king's eyebrows lowered in puzzlement.

“Your Majesty, if I may,” said Melos, “the spell could be used to replant fields burned by raiding parties. A single stalk of wheat could be multiplied to save a village from starvation.”

“Saving villages?” called a dandy from the crowd near the windows. “Surely we must have better things to do with our magegems than *that*.” In a softer voice, barely overheard by Keladon, he added to his nearby peers, “Old Melos wants to save his cousins.”

“Or is our guest the one with common cousins?” said another. “Only his mother's word got him claimed by the late king.” Laughter broke out around him.

Another sycophant, his hair red and curly, shook his head. “A village starved to death cannot pay tax,” he said, in a voice, though quiet, that carried through the room.

Raboros looked to the ceiling, plainly bored.

Norobom strode forward and thrust back his shoulders. A ripple passed down the length of his red cloak. “In addition, the spell my former colleague has shown us would also serve our forces when

campaigning in hostile lands,” he said. “Throughout history, many a campaign has been lost because men could not be fed. Foraging armies are as locusts. With this spell, we could replenish fields previously foraged by our armies, and remain longer in battle against our foes.”

A bustle came from the side door. Raboros looked up, his face more lively than it had been since Keladon had entered. “Yes, our garden shears have finally arrived! Excellent! Houseboy, go to the bush on that table and cut the rose chosen by each of our lads as he comes up.”

The houseboy did as he was bid. A young boy, with a smooth face and innocent eyes, he kept his gaze turned to the floor as Dobak and the other sycophants came toward the table. Keladon retreated a step, and his grasp tightened on the outside of his basket hilt.

Dobak pointed at a large bloom that had just begun to open. As the houseboy reached for his selected rose, Dobak shook his head. “You’re a pretty one, aren’t you?”

The boy’s hand trembled, and he pulled the shear back from the stem. He bowed his head again. “My Lord, I don’t understand.”

“I see you know to work the naïve act. Get to cutting me my rose.”

The boy reached quickly for the stem and cut. He winced when a thorn caught his fingertip, but he kept quiet. Head bowed, he handed held out the rose.

Dobak snatched it from his trembling hand. “Boy, mark my words. Wait, you don’t know how to mark, do you? Remember this. If ever I catch you letting the king see your face full-on, I’ll put a scar on each of those lovely cheekbones and the king will never look at you again.” Dobak passed the rose to his left hand, then fondled his sword’s hilt in warning.

He breathed deeply from the flower, gave Keladon a cold smile, and turned to the daises. Dobak tucked the rose behind his right ear and winced faintly as a thorn drew blood from his scalp. He climbed to the dais below Raboros’ throne and knelt. “I am humbled by Your Majesty’s gift.”

“You have earned it, Dobak,” replied Raboros. “Oh, how you’ve earned it.”

*Would there were a way to move beyond this sycophancy. Raboros might be inclined contrary to nature, but there’s no need for*

*him to conduct court like this.* An anxious feeling gripped Keladon's chest. He studied a smudge on one of the mirrors to try to derail his thoughts. *Sodelerak would be better off had Larabos' daughter been the mistress, and my mother, the queen.*

Keladon squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, stepped back, took a breath. He glanced up and Norobom caught his attention. His former peer in the battlemage corps was the nearest to a friend he had in this room. Norobom gave his head a minimal, resigned shake. *Fool, are your thoughts too plainly visible?* Keladon's body stiffened and he blanked his face. He barely breathed for a moment, until it became clear the king and his dandies had attention only for their own crowd.

The houseboy cut the last rose from the bush and backed away while the hangers-on returned their focus to the king. Raboros leaned forward and looked past them all. "What other tricks can you show us, squire of Korobei?"

*He won't even call me 'son of Radobom.'* Keladon inhaled deeply to push down his resentment. "Your Majesty, there are two more spells I wish to show, spells that may be useful in finding the secrets of your enemies. Pass Light and Pass Sound."

"Two?" Raboros clearly sounded annoyed the number was so large.

"I may work them at the same time, Your Majesty."

Melos spoke up. "Is that safe?"

Keladon took another breath. "It will be safe." The worst that could happen would be an accidental touching of charged objects, but the king wouldn't be holding any of them.

*Unless you asked him to—*

*Do you want to visit the headsman?* another part of his mind replied. Keladon's pernicious thoughts shrank back to wherever they lurked.

Raboros drank more wine. "Proceed."

To a footman, Keladon said, "I need two houseboys." He remembered Dobak's threat to the most recent servant. "I'm sure the one who just attended us has been assigned to other tasks by now, so any two will do, no especial requirements." He put a little emphasis on the final words.

The footman's eyes briefly showed recognition of Keladon's meaning. He bowed and backed out of the room, soon to return with

two houseboys, both plain looking. One had gangly arms and misshapen teeth; the other, a face scarred by childhood pox.

Keladon gripped the blue and tapped its energies. With a few words of Jelorean, he sent energy flowing into the earhorns, then the two hand mirrors.

"I will hand each of you two objects," Keladon said. "Do not touch them together. You would get a painful jolt."

Keladon gave the gangly one an earhorn and a mirror. "Go into the concourse," Keladon said.

"Concourse, Your Grace?"

Some of the footmen hissed. Melos narrowed his eyes. Norobom only responded by quirking his mouth, though he had most cause for offense—he was the only duke in the room.

"You may address me as 'Your Illustriousness,'" Keladon said. "Take these items into the hallway." He waved with his right hand toward the double-doors.

"Yes, Your Gr—Illustriousness." The boy nodded nervously.

"If no one is about, hold the mirror up to the paintings along the wall, or the gardens seen through the windows. Turn the earhorn toward your feet. If you see other people, tell them you wish to speak to them in the name of—Melos, Master of Offices." Not Raboros', because he would not tell the boy to speak for the king without the king's word; not his own, because he wanted his name out of the minds of the palace's habitants. "Turn the mirror to them and ask them to speak into the earhorn."

"I should put it in my ear, Your Illustriousness?"

"No, hold it in the air near their mouths. Are my instructions clear?" The houseboy nodded. "Then go." The gangly boy left, and other servants swung the double doors shut behind him.

Keladon turned to the pock-faced boy. "Take the remaining mirror and earhorn to the foot of the daises, and hold them up for the king's inspection."

"By your command, Your Illustriousness." He took the items from Keladon and went around the long table.

"Honored gentlemen," Keladon said to the sycophants, "I suggest you take up positions where you can see the face of the mirror beheld by His Majesty. I also must ask you to be quiet. Although I can make the audible demonstration louder, it would more rapidly waste the energy of our irreplaceable magegem." He glanced at the

blue under his fist. It looked dimmer already, but he had to be seeing things. He'd barely tapped it.

The houseboy reached his position and held up the mirror and earhorn. Keladon's admonition had been unnecessary. The gaggle of hangers-on fell silent.

"That's the painting in the corridor of Balar and Samala," Raboros said in a ragged whisper. "We see it in the mirror as plain as if we stood in front of it." He looked at the closed double doors. "There's no trick of reflected reflections here. Your magic carries the sight between the two mirrors as if they are the two sides of the same window." He lifted his hand, pointed his forefinger to the ceiling. "Shh."

From the earhorn came the gangly servant's voice. "I say, speak to me in the name of Melos, Master of Offices."

"What knave does he speak to?" Raboros asked, peering at the mirror. His sycophants gave looks of regretted ignorance.

In reply to the houseboy's question, a curt voice said, "The old man would never give you a command directly."

"It wasn't him directly," replied the gangly servant, "but it was His Illustriousness, Keladon, so—squire of Korobei."

"Kela—what is this you hold? An earhorn?" After a moment, the other person's next words came faster, as if the pause had compressed them together. "Does a mage listen to me? Melos himself?" The curtiness dropped from his voice. "My Lords, I am a mere servant, I know nothing of your ways, should you choose to entrust this houseboy with your powers—"

"Enough." Raboros flicked his hand at the air, then rubbed his temples. "We have no need to hear more prattle from lackeys."

Keladon spoke to the blue the commands needed to halt the spells, then lifted his hand from it. The blue might have been a shade lighter than when he'd started his spells, but he couldn't tell for certain. His eyes weren't as sharp as they had been during his youthful days in the battlemage corps. He told the pock-faced boy to put the earhorn and mirror down on the table and bring his fellow houseboy in from the corridor.

After the boy left, Keladon bowed. "Thank you, Your Majesty, for the honor of demonstrating these spells."

"We see how they could be useful to our spies," Raboros said. "Melos, have you any comment?"

“I certainly agree, Your Majesty, our agents may well find them useful.”

Norobom looked thoughtfully at the objects on the table. “Sire, these spells might have other uses that could redound to the glory of your kingdom.”

Raboros’ brow creased. He reached for his wine and said, “We leave such details to you, sir and goodman. Now, we must say a few words to His Illustriousness.” He raised his voice to carry through the room, and his eyes looked less bleary when he locked his gaze on Keladon. “As is apparent to all, you are capable of deeds that we lack the ability to perform. Do you swear, before Balar, Samala, and all your ancestors feasting in their hall, to perform these deeds, and solely for the glory of our reign?”

Keladon stole a glance at Melos. Their gazes met and the Master of Offices briefly cocked his head while insistence showed around his eyes. He would get no private, explicit assurance from Raboros. These elliptical words were all the approval the king would give to being cuckolded by his bastard half-brother, and best he take it. Flawed as Raboros was, he was the son of the wife, the son who wore the crown.

Keladon bowed deeply to the king. “The glory of your reign is the paramount guidance for all my deeds, Your Majesty.” He was glad the bow hid his face and any spoor from his lie. He acted for the good of the kingdom, not the good of this man born lucky.

“Good,” Raboros said. “Now you may take your leave.” The firmness of his gaze faded then, and though his lips turned up, he watched the hangers-on crowding the daises with unsmiling eyes.

A footman pushed the houseboys toward the table to gather up Keladon’s implements, and the palace mages took custody of the magegems. Keladon worked his way through the bustle toward the rear doors, and from there into the corridor. Time to head to his guest rooms, and books by the fireside—

Melos caught up with him near the painting of Balar and Samala. The Divine Couple welcomed the first man into their hall. The window lit up the portrayal of the first man’s old age falling into his funeral pyre as his spirit regained its youth. Melos strove to catch his breath. “Your Illustriousness. A word. If you please.”

“Of course, Master of Offices.” The corridor was public, but without Block Sound, any room in the palace would be public. “May

I express to you my gratitude to His Majesty for recognizing I take action on his behalf.”

“You need me to confirm—” Melos’ next breath came deeper and more slowly. “—what His Majesty said?”

“No.” Keladon frowned. “I assumed you sought me out for that reason.”

“I did not think I needed to. Rather, I ask you to come with me to the royal library.”

“The library? For what purpose?”

Melos moved one hand near Keladon’s elbow and gestured with the other. Keladon started walking. “The royal library is second only to yours regarding the Jaloreans’ legacy. Our librarians recently found a codex containing spells unfamiliar to the mages employed here at the palace. We want you to study it.”

“What sort of spell?”

“It requires a green magegem.” Melos lowered his brows and glanced up the corridor. Two officials walked their way. They broke up their conversation and halted their progress to hail the Master of Offices.

Melos returned the greeting and asked a few questions about some matter of policy. Keladon kept silent until the officials moved on. Green was the color of medicine and living things. “Many sorts of spells use green magegems,” he said.

“It is difficult for me to describe it,” Melos said. “I lack fluency with the terms of your art. All I can do is show you.”

They wound their way through the palace. They passed people of all stations, from houseboys and scullery maids, to clerks and skilled artisans, to noblemen in sumptuous doublets and bejeweled swords. All paused for Melos. The old man strode past the commoners and stopped for the nobles. The noblemen only spoke to Keladon as afterthoughts.

Their slow progress brought them to the south wing of the palace, then up three flights of stairs. A door opened, releasing the smell of paper and binding glue, and a glimpse of shelved books. Keladon felt at ease for the first time on this visit to the palace.

The library overlooked a small courtyard surrounded by the south wing. Shelves covered every square inch of wall space between windows and doors, and bowed under the weight of their books. Keladon squinted at labels glued to the books’ spines, unable to read



them from his distance, but more labels were glued to the shelves' front edges and bore texts written in a firm, precise hand. History, Theology, Logic, Rhetoric, Natural Philosophy—

A librarian in a plain yellow doublet and breeches stepped forward and bowed. "Sir, follow this man," Melos said to Keladon. He then drew from an outer pocket of his doublet a folded paper, sealed with wax impressed with the Master of Offices's sigil. "You may open this when you arrive at the room to which this man will lead you." To the librarian, he added, "Leave him to his studies in peace."

The librarian blinked, swallowed. "I—We have prepared the room for him."

Keladon said, "Lead me."

At tables near the windows, paper rustled as clerks, noblemen, and a few ladies turned pages. A few readers glanced up at Keladon, then returned to their books. One lady, though, skin pale and smooth as a marble statue, kept her gaze upon him. Her brunet hair, lustrous from the window's light. A thin white silken strip, pinned atop her hair and covering her ears, marked her as a widow. She smiled coyly at him and with smooth deliberation slid a leather bookmark off the edge of her table to land at Keladon's feet.

"Noble sir, pardon me," she said with an artful lilt in her voice.

He knew how the game was played. He bowed, picked up the bookmark, and set it on the table. "I am delighted to assist, my lady—?"

"Countess Dalasa. Are you Keladon, squire of Korobei? The great mage of both war and peace?"

"A mage, yes, but whether I am a great one is for others to say."

"I shan't detain you, noble sir. But will you be visiting the palace for a time?"

Even after he bedded the queen, Melos and Norobom would ask him to stay at the palace until the queen missed her next tide of Samala. Kept at the palace, and he had needs like any man; and this lady had needs like any woman. "A fortnight, at least. Till another time, my lady."

They parted, but her coy smile lingered in his mind's eye as he walked on.

At the final table in the room, just before a narrow door, sat two palace mages, one with graying hair, the other with crow's feet and a

sizable paunch. The latter scribbled notes onto foolscap as the forefinger of his other hand tracked over the open pages of a beginner's treatise on blue magegems. Rare to see someone old enough to have wrinkles begin training in magic.

The librarian took a key from a pocket of his doublet and unlocked the narrow door. "Your Illustriousness, please enter."

Keladon went into a small room. More shelves, jammed with books, covered the walls, save for the door and a window to his left. Although drawn curtains dimmed the light, the cramped space held books close enough for him to read titles as he waited for the librarian to light a candle. Of the books across the room, he recognized some from their size, shape, or the ornament of their bindings. This room held advanced works on magic. He had written a number of them, and his assistants, several others. Some were translations from Jelorean, but many were written, wholly or partly, in that tongue. Some related to the commands from which spells were built, and a handful taught techniques for crafting new spells.

A plush chair and a thick table filled the center of the room. A thin clank pulled his attention away from the books lining the shelves to the tabletop. The librarian had placed the key on the table, next to a book with a narrow leather bookmark. The only other item on the table was a piece of fabric covering a lumpy shape about a foot in each measure. "You may lock the door from the inside, Your Illustriousness," the librarian said. He left and shut the door behind him.

Keladon locked the door. He held his sword against his outer thigh and walked sideways around the table, checking the walls for small holes through which someone could see or hear what he would do, and finding none. He pulled the curtain back far enough to see a few servants' children chasing each other at the far end of the courtyard. Satisfied with the room's security, he sat down. The lumpy, covered shape sat near his left hand. He guessed what it was. No need to expose it yet.

He pulled the folded paper from his pocket and broke the seal. He guessed its contents before he unfolded it and started reading. A pass, authorizing the use of magic on the palace grounds by the bearer between the hours of three and six o'clock that afternoon. Signed by both Melos and Forek, the chief palace mage. His subordinates continually monitored the grounds for the casting of

spells. Without a pass, a mage casting a spell in the palace could get thrown in the dungeons. Or worse.

Keladon pulled his watch from his pocket. Three-thirty. Presumably time enough to finish by six o'clock. He opened the book to see what spell Melos wanted him to cast.

*Codex Doril-Haberiana*, the title page read. *A collection of spells composed by the lost Jelorean masters, castable with the powers of a green magegem, discovered in a vault located in the vicinity of the town of Doril-Haberi in the Kingdom of Sodelerak, set and printed in Teisoret, capital city of said realm, in the 22nd year of the reign of Raboros, First of that name—*

Keladon turned the next pages, to the blocky geometric shapes of the Jelorean syllabary. The original document had been handwritten by some millenium-dead Jelorean scribe. Most likely the printer had set the pages of the codex in ignorance of the Jelorean language, simply copying the appearance of the syllabary's symbols. Without understanding what he set, the printer could well have introduced errors, or copied errors in the original, that a person fluent in Jelorean would have corrected. Keladon read the introduction to grasp the printer's understanding of the language, as well as the era in Jelorean history in which the original had been written. A few decades before the Jeloreans's final collapse, he assessed, and mentally corrected a number of obvious printing mistakes. The codex featured spells relevant to the physician's art.

His fingers found the leather bookmark. He opened the book, laid the front and back plates flat, and smoothed down the central crease with pressed-together fingertips. A memory came up of a dimly lit, sensual evening, his hands gliding over the warm, curved skin of a widowed lady whose name sadly eluded him.

His gaze went to the top center of the page, where the spell's name should be. His hands froze and his breath caught. He had never heard of this spell, but it made sense Melos and Norobom wanted it casted.

*Father a Son.*

Melos and Norobom? He wanted it too. If he could assure a boy, an heir to Raboros, would come from his current visit to the palace, he would return for the boy's claiming ceremony, and never return again. His thoughts turned, down a lane he had not let them go in the few days since the meeting with Melos and Norobom. He would be

the father of Sodelerak's next king. Even though no one else could ever know his son's true father, he would. Wonder and pride swelled his chest.

Pride he could never show anyone else. The prudent parts of his mind quietly, calmly guided his pride like a tamed bull back to its corral.

He had work to do. Keladon read on. In keeping with the late date of composition, the spell's text assumed the mage knew which hand went where and when. *The magus is to grasp the sendpod.*

Sendpod? He puzzled for a moment before the most likely explanation, a printer's error, and a plausible correction occurred to him. *Seedpod* fit with the subject matter of the spell, but was it truly a late Jelorean term for *scrotum*? He knew the language well, but not with the mastery of a native speaker. Keladon rose. He'd seen a few Jelorean glossaries near the windows....

Half an hour later, and after a wary glance at his watch, he set the glossaries back in their places. The one with the most frank language dated back to the early years of the Jelorean empire, when *bullstones* was the most common term for testicles. The glossary from the late Jelorean period focused on technical terms relating to warfare, battle magic, and tax collection.

Assuming the intended word was *scrotum*, Keladon kept reading. The spell assessed animalcules in the male's semen (he wondered if the spell would work on animals as well as men) and rendered lifeless those that would impregnate a female with a girl-child.

The flux usable by the spell could be no more than six-hundredths of a boil per drop of time. More than that and the spell would raise the temperature of the male's semen so much all its animalcules would die of heatstroke. Two-hundredths was recommended: a flux low enough for the pain suffered by the male to be tolerable, but high enough for the process to proceed quickly. The codex failed to guarantee success. *For a man who expels a typical amount of semen, maintain the spell for three hundred drops of time. A little under three minutes, as time was counted in Sodelerak, but who knew how much was typical for a Jelorean man? This will give him a son nine times in ten, if he impregnates the woman within two days.*

Presumably Melos had some intelligence the queen was near the peak of her tide of Samala. Or else he expected Keladon to repeat the spell as needed. Keladon reread the spell, then in his mind worked

his way through its steps to be confident none were omitted by the author, and to know what he should expect at each moment. The testicles that could be lost to an error would be his own.

Time to begin. Although the room barred vision to anyone outside, as for sound, the books would muffle it, but the door would not.

Keladon pulled the fabric from the lumpy shape, revealing a green. He'd expected one, but still exhaled in admiration. The color was as rich as a well-kept lawn on a sunny spring day. A beautiful piece. He would wager it had never been tapped between its charging and the moment the palace mages had brought it up from Melos' vault. He didn't need so much charge—the mottled green one he'd just used in the king's audience chamber had more than six boils of flux left in it. Melos' palace mages would have told him that.

Melos wanted him to succeed.

Keladon's heartbeat slowed and pounded. What would Melos do if he failed?

He set his watch on the table, then untied the ribbons holding his breeches to his doublet. He had practice doing it himself, from visits over the years to prosperous young widows living in the vicinity of Korobei, but it would have been easier if Lar, his valet, were here. He worked his breeches and underhose down over his rump to mid-thigh and sat as if on a convenience stool.

His left hand gripped the magegem's handle. "*Attend me,*" he whispered. In the quiet room, the magegem would hear. Foolishness warmed his cheeks as his right hand cradled his scrotum. "*Target your energies on the seedpod I touch.*" His chest tightened in expectation he had the word wrong and some disaster would lance his genitals. A pleasant tingle filled his scrotum and he exhaled in relief. "*Render lifeless any animalcules generative of a girl-child, flux two-hundredths of a boil per drop of time, begin.*"

The tingle spread into his abdomen, behind the root of his manhood. It began to hurt. Keladon winced and kept his gaze on his watch. Three minutes. The pain grew more intense, switching from a tingle to pulses of pressure, like someone squeezed his scrotum. He loosened his right hand's grip but the pain clenched his fingers into a rigid claw. His breaths sounded ragged through clenched teeth. Two minutes to go—

The pulses of pressure increased in both intensity and duration.

He pressed his lips together to keep from crying out, but he couldn't stop himself from whimpering. Sweat ran down his forehead and stung his eye. He blinked and shimmied his head and a drop of sweat flew to pop against the paper of the open book. He looked where it bled into the paper and read again that the level of flux he had chosen made the pain tolerable. Tolerable? Had the Jeloreans been made of stronger stuff than modern man, or had their mages reveled in the pain they could inflict under cover of their art? One minute and thirty seconds—

The pressure increased and the pulsing stopped, replaced by a monotonous agony compressing his scrotum and pushing against the root of his manhood. What mangling did his testicles suffer? His manhood, stupid thing, stirred and lifted off his thumb to stand against his abdomen. If the spell failed and he sired a daughter, would it be able to rise to another attempt to impregnate the queen? One minute to go. His lips remained compressed, but now muffled, high-pitched grunts, not whimpers, escaped them. Sweat ran down all his exposed skin and thick, unpleasant heat swaddled him under his doublet. Thirty seconds.

Spots swam in his vision, and the ticking of the seconds seemed to slow, like mockery from some cruel false Jelorean god. Fifteen seconds. *The end is in sight, remain steadfast—*

As soon as the last second ticked by, he whispered, “*Stop rendering lifeless any animalcules. Release the target. Re—*” “Almost an error that would drain the magegem, and damage its storage cabinet and other magegems around it. “*No flux. Release your attention from me.*” He pulled his hands away from the magegem and his crotch. Keladon slumped back in his chair. Sweat continued to run down his skin, and his burning genitals sat exposed to the room's air.

Cautiously, he looked down, expecting to see bruising and swelling. But his scrotum and manhood looked intact. Pain throbbed. He pulled up his underhose and breeches, but his hands shook when he tried threading the ribbons on his doublet through his breeches's matching holes. He caught his breath a few minutes before his hands held steady enough for him to work.

Breeches retied, he stood and started for the door. Each step hurt, and it seemed impossible his manhood would ever rise again.

A few hours later, Keladon sat near the fireplace in his guest suite. On a nearby table, an empty plate held chicken bones and sprigs of rosemary, next to a half-full goblet. The wine had dulled the ache pervading his entire crotch.

Knuckles rapped on the doorway to his suite. Lar, his valet, set down his darning needle and Keladon's spare doublet, and went to the door. After a short conversation, the door thudded shut and Lar cleared his throat. "The Master of Offices has requested your presence, Your Illustriousness, and has sent a footman to guide you."

He wanted the queen bedded now? Melos would give him no more time to heal? Keladon frowned, then set his annoyance aside.

Though his valet was a young man, with only two years in his service, he knew Lar enough to glean the valet's thoughts from his tone of voice. "You think the man without has some other purpose?" Keladon asked.

Lar looked surprised and contrite. "I only say what he told me, Your Illustriousness." A faint leering grin lurked around his face.

If he could misdirect his valet's curiosity about his doings, so much the better to keep this whole affair secret. "If you had to guess at his purpose, what would you say?"

Lar blushed. "Your Illustriousness—"

"I know you saw me return this afternoon on unsteady legs with my breeches poorly retied."

Lar's grin broke out. "It's not for me to ask who a fine lord passes his time with, Your Illustriousness. But is it the same lady as this afternoon?"

Keladon rose from his chair and rebuked Lar with his gaze. "A gentlemen protects the reputation of ladies."

"Of course, Your Illustriousness, my pardons to you and—"

"The door." Keladon maintained a haughty look. He strode toward the door and Lar scurried to open it for him. It would only take minutes for Lar to gossip to the palace servants that Keladon had taken pleasure that day with two different ladies of the court.

Once Keladon stepped out, the waiting footman bowed, turned, and started walking. Keladon followed. Candles in sconces mounted high on the walls lit the quiet corridors. A few other people were about, primarily servants carrying dinner trays or chamberpots. When the others came into view, the footman changed course at the



earliest opportunity to pass through empty galleries or take stairways up or down. Mostly down: after a time, the footman pulled a hilted candle from his pocket, touched the wick to a flame in one of the sconces, then led the way down a creaky wooden stair into an unlit tunnel.

They kept on. Rough, striated stone formed the tunnel walls, and Keladon ducked his head in spots. The ceilings ranged from brick to plaster, both materials dark with years of candle and lantern soot. Despite more twists and turns, Keladon gauged their direction as westward, toward the base of the old castle.

The footman stopped at a closed door, knocked twice, and stepped back. From inside came the sound of a key working a lock. The door swung open, spilling lamplight into the tunnel. The footman bowed to Keladon and swept his arm to indicate the open door. Keladon stepped through, and the footman shut the door behind him.

Melos stood next to a tall, wide rack bearing kegs of strong-smelling beer. His lantern rested in the cleft formed by neighboring kegs. Though less dank than the tunnel, the cellar was as cool and, outside the reach of the lantern, as dimly lit. "Your Illustriousness, are you ready for your task?"

Keladon glared. "My testicles still ache. I understand the window of good chance at success is a short one, but couldn't it wait a day?"

"This evening is the best chance we shall have for the next month. I could not grant you your desired audience with His Majesty before this afternoon. If you had not sought that audience, we would have had you do your work in the library yesterday." Melos gave him a cold look.

Keladon crossed his arms. "Tell me what to do, and I shall get to my task."

"Follow me." Melos walked around the racked kegs. Candlelight cast dancing shadows across thick exposed beams running the length of the ceiling. Gray stones formed the opposite wall of the cellar, and over most of it, cracks ran through the mortar joining the large stone blocks. Melos trailed his fingertips over the wall, found a block at about chest-height, and pushed. His feet slid backward and he stiffened his legs. He pushed again and his legs trembled. He stepped back and his torso heaved with exertion.

"Perhaps you retain the strength I have lost," Melos said.



Keladon stepped closer. "Here?"

Melos nodded. Keladon braced his right foot against a keg, and pushed his right arm against the stone block.

A section of the wall swung inward on grumbling hinges. The opening had jagged outlines from the uneven sizes of the blocks making up the hidden door. A cold draft touched Keladon's hands and face and set Melos' candle flickering. The candlelight revealed the top steps of a dark wooden stairway. "Down," Keladon said, "and then?"

"When your father built the new wings of the palace and joined them to the old castle, we marked all the junctions in the tunnels and secret passages the king needs to follow to reach the queen's bedchamber. The symbol you should look for is a horizontal line of green paint, long as a man's forearm, at eye level. The line has a sharply angled hook at the end in the queen's direction." Melos handed him the candle. "Go, now. The king has heeded my request to remain alone in his chambers for the next two hours, and Queen Lilera's servants have been barred from her private rooms until I give the word. When you are finished, swing the conception harness down from the ceiling and tie her legs to it for twenty minutes. Then come back here. I will be waiting."

The boards creaked under Keladon's feet. After the last step, the tunnel bent to the right. His candle soon revealed his tunnel ended in a T-intersection with another. A step closer brought into view a horizontal line of green paint with a hook pointing to the left. The intersection smelled of stale beer. Shards of a broken mug lay in a kicked-together heap on the floor under the guide symbol.

Someone had disfigured the guide symbol. Charcoal lines fleshed out the symbol with a glans, a penile shaft, and a scrotum sprouting hair. All three of the defacements had been drawn by different hands. The servants must have known for years that Raboros never visited the queen in her bedchamber, and they could mock the royal couple in this way without fear of rebuke. *Misdirecting Lar was wiser than you knew.*

He turned left and took a step before a question stopped him. Could he find his way out of the tunnel? How many mug shards and defaced guide symbols were down here? Probably few, but why not make this site even more distinctive? Keladon stepped closer to the defaced guide symbol and extended the candle toward it. He

hesitated at the immaturity of what he planned, then shook his head and chuckled at himself. It fit perfectly with the coarse boyishness of the graffiti. He touched the upper edge of the candle at the urethra drawn in the charcoal glans. Molten wax, milky in the candlelight, dribbled down the wall and quickly solidified. He set off in the queen's direction.

The remaining length of tunnel was free of interlineations and spilled beer. The floor rose and fell, he guessed to avoid tunnels at other depths. The mouths of cross-tunnels welled up in the darkness. He paused at each opening to listen for footsteps or a person's breaths, but heard nothing more than dripping water and scurrying rats.

The guide symbol directed him into yet another tunnel, but this one soon turned a corner to a narrow flight of stairs. The boards had been built with care and did not creak under his feet. The stairs kept climbing. The stone walls gave way to plaster with peeling whitewash. The stairs switched back and forth at small landings, and Keladon paused at a couple of them to catch his breath before climbing further.

The stairway grew even narrower; Keladon raised both his elbows a few inches away from his body and his sleeves brushed the plaster. His father had grown stout late in life. How had he made the climb to Larabos's daughter? Perhaps he hadn't. His father's appetites had remained vigorous despite his age, and Keladon's mother had surely not been his only mistress.

He reached another landing and looked around for the next flight of stairs. He found none, only a narrow door lacking a handle. It lacked hinges on this side. His breaths came heavily, but no longer from exertion. Keladon extended his hand and pushed the door open.

After the candlelit gloom of the tunnel and the staircase, the Queen's bedchamber dazzled his eyes. On lowboy tables stood stacks of books. A vanity bore two candelabras, flanking a magnifying mirror and small boxes spilled over with face powders and jewelry. Thick rugs of Peluraki design, displaying images of peasants working fields, covered the floor in overlapping profusion between the door he'd entered and a four-post bed. Drapes covered the windows and more Peluraki rugs, these showing hunting scenes, hung on the walls. From between wall hangings peeked thick stones and rough mortar.

The Peluraki prisoner had a velvet-lined cell.

Queen Lilera stood at a reading table with her back to the door. A thick dress of blue velvet followed the lines of her figure, and pins studded with diamonds clasped a blue veil to her dark blond hair. She closed her book and he bowed as she turned toward him with a rustle of her skirt and petticoats. “Your Majesty, I am Keladon, son of Radobom and squire of Korobei.”

He held the bow, waiting for her response. The pattern in the rug showed a farmer standing behind an ox team, plowing a field in the shadow of a Peluraki castle. Memories of trampled fields, of tumbling stones, of screaming men came to him.

Queen Lilera spoke in a measured tone. “My late father-in-law sired a hundred bastards, yet Melos and Norobom sent the butcher of Sherbal Ford to my bedchamber.”

Though she pronounced the placename with a Peluraki accent, he instantly knew what she meant. Memories of the final battle of the campaign rushed into his mind. Keladon maintained his bow, and the fingers of his left hand curled slightly while his right forefinger twitched. The Jelorean words *Burn At Distance* sounded in his mind’s ear. He shut his eyes to push the memory away. “You may call me what you wish, Your Majesty.”

“A queen does not need a bastard’s permission to do that,” she said. “Rise. I would look on your face.”

He stood and met her gaze. He had only seen her once before, when he stood in the back of the hall at her wedding to Raboros. She had been pretty then, in a timid girlish way. Now, though, her mature beauty sent shivers over his neck and chest. The intervening decades had given her the assured gravity of adulthood. He could not look away, even though her face showed disgust.

“I could look on you and almost believe you are a man like any other. But I know you are not. Tell me, how many sons of Plurach did your powers send to their graves at Sherbal Ford?”

The memories grew strong. He sweated despite the cool room. “Need we speak of such things, madam?”

“Do you want to do what Melos and Norobom asked of you?” She crossed her arms and gave him a haughty look. “Tell me how many sons of Plurach you slew that day.”

He wanted to look at the floor, the bed, anything but her eyes. He took a deep breath and met her gaze. “Between four and six

thousand Peluraki foot and about six hundred knights, madam. Roughly another two thousand more foot drowned attempting to flee across the river.”

“Eight thousand six hundred in sum?”

He had worked the numbers in his head on many night in his prayers to Balar, nearly two decades ago, at a time when he still prayed. “As best I recall, madam.”

“So few? In your camp, after your half-brother took me as his prize, your compatriots spoke as if you had turned a hundred thousand daughters of Plurach into widows.”

Keladon shook his head. “Men brag, madam. I didn't ask them to, then or since.”

“Oh yes. I know you resigned your position as a battlemage, and you've retired to your estate to peacefully work magic. You're the butcher with a conscience.”

“Madam, I slew men, highborn and low, who happened to serve a king not my own. I take no glory in it. I have vowed to never do it again.”

“You have? You don't need to.” Queen Lilera coldly regarded him. “You were richly rewarded for your butchery. You have an estate for life, leisure for your researches, and all the books and magegems you need. Renounce all those fruits, and I shall believe you are contrite.”

“I lack a taste for blood, madam, but I am fortunate I can use my skills and knowledge to serve Sodelerak in other ways. Just as you have been asked to serve Sodelerak—”

“I have been forced to serve Sodelerak by wearing its crown in public when your customs demand it. Your power, bastard, wrenched me from the loving embraces of my father and brother and trapped me in this tower—”

“Trapped? You have freedom—”

“I do? Yes, I may freely walk the tower, the west wing of the new palace, and the courtyard within the west wing. If I pretend Melos's spies are not watching me from a distance, I can pretend to myself I have the liberty of the outer gardens and two of the new palace's other three wings. And since my father-in-law died, I have been freed from your half-brother's uninterested poking between my legs. But those things are not freedom. You know that as well as I. The only freedom I have is the freedom to refuse you.” Queen Lilera's

eyes flashed with anger and challenge.

He remembered her earlier words. "I gave you the answer you sought, madam, about my deeds at Suherabal Ford."

"I said not answering me would deny Melos and Norobom the result they wanted. I did not say answering me would grant them it. They sent the one man I will not consent to lie beneath."

*Don't take this guff from any woman*, part of him thought, *not even the queen*. He could wrestle her to the bed, force up her skirts, and have his way with her. Neither Raboros nor the courtiers would be troubled, and Queen Lilera could not hate him any more than she already did.

But a woman with cause to hate a man could redirect her hate to his unborn child. A peasant woman around Korobei could find silphium or pennyroyal in the woods and ingest it to kill a child and expel it from her body. Melos would try to stop Queen Lilera from receiving such an herb, but were she motivated enough, she could get it, and the loss of the child would appear to arise from natural causes.

Also, even if she could not hate him more for taking her by force, he would hate himself. It wouldn't be the same as using magic to kill, but would still be a barbarous use of the advantage in strength nature had given him. A gentleman had no need for such recourse.

"I don't know that refusing me is your only freedom, madam, but you do have it. May I sit?" Keladon gestured at a nearby divan.

She inclined her head to allow him.

As he sat, he glanced at a stack of books on a nearby table. Frothy novels, written in the past few years, set in a Jelorea that never was, about a courtier who worked as a spy, whose magegems never ran out of charge and could inspire any woman to lead him to her bedchamber. He quirked his lips in passing. The situation binding Queen Lilera and him had no room for such fancies.

"Although you have that freedom, madam, exercising it will gain you nothing. However many bastards and cuckoo eggs my father might have gotten on wenches and other men's wives, I am the only one he claimed. For that reason, I am the only man Melos and Norobom will permit to stand for your husband in this task."

Queen Lilera set her fists on her hips and leaned toward him. "They shall be gravely disappointed. I will not lie beneath you."

He would hate to subject himself to Father a Son another time,

but he would not let her see that. Keladon stretched his hands along the divan. "Madam, if you turn me away tonight, I shall come back in a month, and if need be, every month after that."

"I will never lie beneath you."

He shrugged. "If not me, madam, then you will lie beneath no man."

"Do you mean those words to frighten me?" She laughed coldly. "They fill me with joy."

With an exaggerated sigh, Keladon waved the back of his hand at the stack of frothy novels. "Madam, unless you have addled your mind with these absurd fancies, my words should frighten you. Every month that passes without you conceiving a child will make it more likely Melos will pressure the king to divorce you and find a wife more pliant and in the full bloom of fecundity."

She glowered. "Neither my husband the bugger, nor the old man who tells him how to wear his crown, would ever dare. If they cast me aside, I would tell everyone from the highest lord to the lowest knave why my husband never fathered a child. My brother, King Aril, would rouse the lions sleeping in the hearts of the sons of Plurach at the insult to a daughter of their royal house. Would my husband allow you to remain at peace at your little estate, when war would be unleashed on your kingdom and your peasants would hear for the first time their king is inclined contrary to nature? Or would he force you to become a butcher again?"

His legs stiffened as if to push himself away from her words. "The peasants and goodmen of Sodelerak would believe their king is a robust and virile man, and blame you for the failure to produce an heir." He gave her a calm look. "They would reject your rumors of the king's inclination as Peluraki lies. Those of us who know better would keep quiet for the sake of our kingdom, our positions, or both."

A passing doubt was visible on her face. "The other kings would side with Plurach against my husband."

Keladon turned a wry eye at the stack of novels before speaking to her. She spoke from more blindness to reality. "The kings of Dosoten and Rak-pawindu know the truth already. Their emissaries have seen King Raboros hold court often enough. But both those kings have unmarried daughters who either cannot or are unlikely to inherit their thrones. Those girls would be pawns for the gambit."

Lilera too had been a pawn, a sacrifice offered by her father to give him more time to develop Plurach's pieces. Keladon kept that thought to himself. "Melos would counsel King Raboros to take one or the other of those girls, thus cementing an alliance with her father against Peluraki aggression."

He leaned forward. "Though there would be no Peluraki aggression. Your brother has had cause to declare war several times during his reign, yet never has. Pelurak has some battlemages now, but we have more, with better training, and more caches of magegems to tap." He paid little attention to his own words, and much to her reaction. How much might she know of her brother's war capability? From her face, she either was so apprised she knew he spoke the truth, or so uninformed she feared he did.

Queen Lilera looked down to sturdy peasants in the rug, and her eyes glistened in the candlelight. He remembered again the timid girl brought before the altar of Balar and Samala to wed his half-brother. But her sadness and resignation soon softened, making way for her face to show a haughty, regal bearing. His heart lifted in his chest. "You shall be the most lucky bastard any king ever fathered. You shall lie with a queen and live."

Afterward, he swung the legrests of the conception harness down from the ceiling. The hinges groaned from long disuse. Flecks of rust fell like a flurry of bloody snow. Once the legrests were unfolded, her legs remained solidly on the mattress.

"Your legs, madam?"

She left them on the bed. "Do what you must."

He lifted her legs and leaned them against the legrests's padding. The light of a small candle made her skin milk-pale. Sadness panged him. He was not the monster she thought him to be, and seemingly nothing he could do would change that. Yet he had to try. He buckled a padded strap across her shins, an inch above her ankles, careful to make it secure but not too tight. She would be comfortable... at least as comfortable as anyone could be with her legs raised straight in the air for twenty minutes.

He slid across her bed and reached to the floor for his doublet and retrieved his watch from its pocket. Because she remained nude, he would as well. After sitting cross-legged on the bed, he set the watch

near him and squinted at the time.

“You need not stay,” Lilera said. She stared expressionlessly at the ceiling. “But have the manners to tell Melos to alert my servants when I may be freed of this thing.”

“I put you into it,” he replied. “It would be fitting for me to release you from it.” He gestured at the bed. “May I sit?”

She looked at him with distant eyes, and the sadness panged him again. “Can I stop you?” she said.

Uneasily, he sat. A minute ticked past. The curves of her body, capturing shadows cast by the candle, drew his gaze and repelled it both. To leer at the queen would dishonor them both, but he would never get another chance to see her nude body.

Her stare turned keen and she studied her legs and the contraption of iron, wood, and leather binding them, and relief filled Keladon when she said, “Would there were some magic to spare me this.”

He looked away from her and at the bed curtain, in the direction of the table next to the divan bearing her foolish books. “Magic is not the easy matter some puffed novels make it out to be, Your Majesty.”

A fraction of her earlier anger returned to her voice. “I am aware of that, squire of Korobei. Do you think all I have learned is from trivial entertainments?”

“I only know what books you have—”

“From a bowl of apples, you pick the one pear.” She kept a haughty look on him as she pointed at different spots on the bed curtains, indicating different tables he’d glimpsed around the room. “I have books on the histories of Jelorea, of Sodlerach since the rediscovery of magegems, descriptions of magegem vaults and caches, *A Primer on the Capabilities of Magegems* by Telapuj...”

His cheeks suddenly burned. “My apologies, madam. Clearly you have a stronger grasp than most of what magic can and cannot do.” Memories of Raboros’ boredom during the afternoon’s demonstrations came to Keladon. “Particularly, Telapuj’s *Primer* is the best introduction for people untrained in the art.”

“You draw that conclusion in great measure because he spent eight months researching that book at your school?”

She had studied her books closely indeed. His thoughts whirled, and he covered them with a light tone. “No. Only in small measure.”

Lilera almost smiled, but her face soon grew clouded. “I well



know there is no spell to enhance a woman's fecundity. The Jelorean magelords cast spells for their own needs. Plainly women meant nothing to them. If a woman could not conceive, what of it to them? If she conceived, but could not give birth safely, what of that?"

"Your thoughts on the Jeloreans fit with mine, madam."

Lilera turned her hauteur upon him. "So why have you not composed a spell to replace—" She waved her fingers at the conception harness. "—this thing?"

His genitals shrank from a sudden cold feeling. "Madam, I assure you—"

"How difficult could it be? Say *Jojipo bobe yulato*, and then the Jelorean for 'make the animalcules in semen swim faster.'"

Keladon drew in a breath. "First, madam, you have mispronounced the words for 'attend me.'" He enunciated, "*Jojipo bobi yuloto*—"

"When counting your flaws," Lilera said, "I missed your pedantry."

"If you ever have the chance to use a gem, madam, you will thank me for my pedantry. If a mage mispronounces the command to attend, the gem will do nothing. If a mage mispronounces a command in the midst of the spell, the gem could inflict grievous harm."

Lilera looked chastened.

Keladon went on. "Second, the gems only respond to particular Jelorean words. A green understands the word for 'animalcules,' but won't understand any words to make them swim faster. Though you have it right we can compose new spells, we are limited to use of the words the Jeloreans taught the gems."

She lay silently for a time. "Thank you for your explanation, sir. All I have known is what I have read, but much wisdom remains unwritten, and no one has ever spoken to me of such matters."

Longing sounded in her voice and saddened him. But what could he do to sate it? Yet should he not try? He checked his watch to cover his thoughts. "Your time on the harness has ended, Your Majesty." He unbuckled the strap holding her legs.

She lowered them to the bed. Her face lost expression. "My shift, please."

"Of course, Your Majesty." He hesitated. "You sound less pleased to be free of the harness than I would have expected."

Her thoughts left faint traces on her face. Finally, she drew a breath and turned to him. “You were supposed to be a monster, squire of Korobei.”

“What am I instead?”

“The only person to converse with me about weighty subjects since... since...”

The sadness Keladon felt out of sympathy for returned, this time joined by the disdain Keladon had felt for his half-brother that afternoon. He could forgive Raboros for not seeking the pleasures of the flesh with Lilera. But neglecting her mind and spirit had left her a worthless asset, a rusting sword or a granary full of fungal rot.

He climbed off the bed and stepped through the curtains. Naked in the queen's bedchamber; a story he would take to his grave. Birds fluttered and cooed outside the windows as he retrieved her shift. “Perhaps we could converse again, Your Majesty.”

She paused with her shift halfway on, still obscuring her face. “How?” A plaintive note cracked the word.

“I will stay here at the palace until we know our—encounter—has proven fruitful.” He felt foolish to use the euphemism. He pulled on his garments as he kept talking. “That will take at minimum two weeks. I would be honored if, during that time, you requested, through Melos, that I demonstrate my arts to you.” Another thought came to him. “As part of the demonstration, madam, I could guide you as you cast a spell.”

Her eyes widened with a mix of delight and alarm. “Am I capable?”

“I should think so.”

“Do not flatter me.” Her voice climbed in pitch. Why did she expect flattery again? Had she ever received it here in Sodelerak? “I have never heard of a woman commanding a magegem.”

“The magegems attend whomever commands them. They do not heed their wielder's sex. Among the researchers working at Korobei are several priestesses of Samala.”

“I am no priestess,” Queen Lilera said, “of your goddess or of mine. I am a base woman who happens to be one king's daughter and another's wife.”

“You have read about the magelords. Whatever your sins might be, compared to them, you are a saint.” Keladon looked deeply into her eyes. “You are amply capable of commanding a magegem.”

A hopeful look lightened her face, but she flung it away with a shake of her head. "Melos would never allow it."

Melos did not trust her, of course, but: "The magegems do not belong to him. They are Raboros's property."

Her eyebrows arched. "Are you naïve?"

"I know Melos commands the men who guard the door to the magegem vault," Keladon said. "Yet wouldn't he open the vault if your husband ordered him?"

"You are naïve. Raboros would never order it. After I was forced into his possession, he set me on a high shelf to collect dust while he plays with his dolls. He would gain nothing by allowing me to touch a magegem."

He wanted to tell her some sweet lie, but they both knew the truth. "Yes, but he owes me."

"Owes?"

Keladon spread his hands to indicate her bed and their recent use of it. "He asked me to provide him with an heir. He should be grateful."

She peered at him with a mix of compassion and warning. "How did you survive growing up in the court? If you are not naïve you are dangerously close to it."

"I avoid the intrigues of the palace. Your husband has never had cause to doubt my loyalty. Asking him a favor is not disloyal—"

"It would be worse than a crime," Queen Lilera said. "It would be a mistake. He already will look for a reason to destroy you. Don't give him one for something as foolish as asking to give me command of a magegem. I am not worth your life."

Keladon bowed. "As you wish, Your Majesty. But I urge you to continue your studies of magic. The mages at my school spend years in study before they first cast a spell. I will send you copies of all the primers and beginners's tomes in my library, and we can converse by letter until a time may come that Raboros would give you opportunity to cast a spell."

"Melos will read every letter between us."

Her headboard's ornate geometric carvings in Dosotenese style, the fashion twenty years ago, caught his attention. "I will write knowing he will read what I say." He studied her face. "You fear my half-brother would take my letters as a reason to destroy me?"

"Yes."

“Cannot the queen command me to correspond with her? Only Raboros could countermand you, but we both know he would not bother to do so.” A tug in the back of his mind told him he needed to return to the cellar where he'd left Melos. “I would I could stay, but your husband must be tiring of his enforced solitude.”

“Yes, he must.” Lilera studied him in the dim light. “I too would you could stay.”

“Madam, please consider commanding me to write you regarding the subject of magic. You have both curiosity and a keen intellect to study it.”

“You flatter me, sir,” she said, her voice hollowly formal.

He sought the right words to share his feelings, and found some that at least hinted at them. “I came here tonight not knowing what kind of woman you are, but I leave proud to call you my queen.”