

RINGSHADOW

By Su Elliott

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## CHAPTER ONE

*“And word from the Lord was rare in those days; visions were infrequent.”*

~ I Samuel 3:1

“Hey, Krystan, over your head. There’s a big one!”

The monkey thus addressed wrapped its tail firmly around the tree branch and looked about to find the speaker. Just outside the dense foliage a stoutish sort of boy floated in midair, seated on nothing in a comfortably cross legged position. A large wicker basket was pillowed on his lap.

“Over your head, dullworm,” he said patiently, gesturing with a half-eaten fruit. The monkey chattered rudely at him and tossed the fruit it held with rather more than the necessary force. The boy caught it neatly in his basket, chuckling. “Can you reach it?”

The monkey looked up, assessing its chances. The wineapple was a big one, its maroon skin flushed invitingly with purple. Cautiously, the monkey sidled up a branch toward it. No, that one wouldn’t hold. It solved the problem by climbing a stronger branch above. Hanging by its tail, the monkey lowered itself down and broke off the wineapple, tossing it triumphantly into the basket where the boy eyed it.

“Sure looks good,” he said wistfully. The monkey threw a handful of leaves at him and ran nimbly down to the lower branches. Sitting down, it suddenly metamorphosed into a young man, perhaps eighteen years of age. His narrow, sharply angled face was deeply tanned, framed by a thick mane of tawny, sun streaked hair. The long eyes set closely beneath slanted brows would have given his face a look of hawk-like ferocity were it not for the tropical blue of their color and the softening influence of his sensitive mouth, prone to surprisingly childlike smiles. He wore a knee-length bright yellow robe, open in front, no shirt and loose breeches of deep orange. About his neck flashed a silver torc, set with an uncut triangular stone of creamy white shot through with all the colors of the rainbow.

“I quit, Gorion,” he said. “You eat them faster than I can pick them.”

Gorion slowly descended to Krystan’s level, and with a frown of concentration, moved sideways until he could haul himself onto the branch at the young man’s side. Almost apologetically, he offered a wineapple.

“You’re getting quite skilled at that,” observed Krystan. “Try as I might, all I can ever do is go up and down.” The boy grinned proudly and rewarded himself with another bite of fruit.

“Look,” he said, gesturing expansively. “You can see practically the entire city from up here, except to the south there where the Temple cuts off the view.”

Krystan nodded and leaned back against the tree trunk. His movement shook the branch so that more wineapples fell on the vulnerable heads of other Temple Novices who were picking up windfalls on the ground far below. “It’s nice,” he said. “You can almost see the magic in the air today.”

"I wonder what it's like," mused Gorion. "To live outside Villagra where they have no Temple. What do you suppose foreigners do when their folk become ill or injured?"

"Master Gessayin says that because Yerveyah is everywhere, there is magic everywhere," said Krys.

"Which only the parridae of our Temple can use." The statement was smug.

"And why is that?" The question was not really being asked of Gorion. Krys was staring vaguely over the ocean, eyes unfocused.

"Because we are the Chosen People."

"Chosen for what?"

"Why, to... to be special, I suppose. To have magic... the Gifts: healing, finding, patterning, and all that."

"All you have said is that we are Chosen to be Chosen. That does not answer my question."

Gorion snorted in derision. "You're beginning to sound like old Gessayin yourself. I suppose that's to be expected what with all the time you spend with him." Suddenly he noticed Krys' remote expression and leaned forward to get a better look.

"I'm no patterner," he said. "But I can see something fills your thoughts. What is it? Have you seen a haeda or something?" He cackled and nudged Krystan's shoulder to make him share the jest.

Krys did not react. He turned to look at the Temple almost hungrily.

"Yes," he said at last.

Gorion rocked back on the branch in astonishment, catching himself magically at the last minute. "Are you serious?" he yelped. "Why by all that's holy are you out here picking fruit? You should be shouting it from the rooftops!" He stood up as though to begin following his own advice, but Krys yanked him back down.

"I've already told one of the parridae," he said urgently. "She said Gessayin would send for me. Please don't say anything. I want to wait until he's sure."

"What's to wait for?" the boy said excitedly. "If you've seen a haeda then you are a parridan, too. That's how it is."

"If that's true, then I'll be the youngest ever," Krys replied. "They may decide to wait until I am older to invest me. I just don't want to rejoice too soon. I can trust you, can't I?"

"Oh, certainly," the younger boy said anxiously. "I won't say anything. Oh, what was it like? I've only been a Novice four years. I can't hope to see one for ages yet. Was it beautiful?"

"Yes." Krys was reluctant to say more.

"Krystan!" The call came up from below, and the two leaned over to see a blue-robed parridan beckoning. Krys dropped hastily through the tree, changing to monkey-form again to save time.

"What is it, Tor Gaulkrin?" he asked when he resumed his own shape at the bottom.

"What?" said the stocky parridan in mock dismay. "You mean you, the future Patterner, can't tell by the way I do this-and-that, and tilt my head this-and-so, that

the Temple Master wants to see you now?" The twinkling in the man's eyes told Krys that Gaulkrin knew why Krys was being sent for.

"It is difficult to do a patterning where your own desires are concerned," Krys quoted with a grin, trying to quell his excitement.

"He awaits you in his study," Gaulkrin said with a sweeping gesture of guidance, and he gave Krys a little shove to set him on his way.

"Go well!" cried a voice from the tree.

Krys waved and set off across the hill through the more cultivated sections of the Temple gardens, trying not to seem in a hurry. The gardens were well occupied that day with folk of both the town and the Temple. In Villagra, both plants and people seemed to make a game out of seeing just how brightly they could bedeck themselves without causing actual damage to the eyes. The Temple was no exception. All the parridae were garbed in parridan blue; actually it was one of the fifteen Villagran shades between blue and green of which the precise term mattered to no one but a Villagran. Krys passed a parridan standing among the flamevines talking in earnest tones with a goodwife in scarlet and purple. Nearby a young gardener in tokase (viridian with two parts gold) tended a stand of yellowheads, though he seemed more intent at the moment with catching the winsome eye of the goodwife's daughter than with his own pruning and clipping. A carved redstone bench cleverly camouflaged by a thicket of coppermint bushes held an elderly dowager placidly embroidering on a violet-blue shirt made from iridescent feathertree fibers.

After ducking down a side path to avoid a gaggle of quarreling City Elders, Krys managed to slip in one of the side entrances to the Temple of Yerveyah. It seemed dim and cool inside after the blaze and brilliance of the gardens. The halls, built of bluish-green stone, accented with rose marble columns, had a sub aquatic ambience that was fitting to its coastal location. Folk tended to lower their voices in that section of the Temple, and Krys' sandals merely whispered on the mosaic floor as he walked. He found himself outside the Hall of Song, and had to force himself not to pause to listen to the sweet voices emanating from within. Even harder to pass was the Healing Hall, where Krystan had dreamt of working himself someday, before it became evident that his Gift was that of a patterner. He passed the screened entrance to the cloisters and glanced at it hurriedly, wondering who might be down there now, seeking wisdom and purification in solitude. With the assurance of long residence he negotiated the back halls and corridors of the Temple, smaller and less august than the outer halls, going out at last through an inner courtyard where a breeze-blown fountain touched him with a lacy, rainbow mist. A class of Novices was practicing divining under the bored tutelage of an initiate parridan, so Krys hurried by as unobtrusively as possible, and paused in front of a stone archway, thickly covered with purple flowering vines. Just beyond was a door, which swung open as Krys approached it, revealing a cramped, untidy study.

He stepped eagerly through the door, but then stumbled in shock. His surroundings melted and blurred as though consumed in flame and water, and Krys found himself suddenly in a steaming rain forest. Before he had a chance to react, a snake as thick as his upper arm dropped across his shoulders, and wrapped itself

about his neck in a choking hug, completely blocking his access to the silver band of power at his throat.

“Gessayin!” Krystan gasped, trying vainly to loosen the big serpent’s hold. “Wait...” In his initial panic, he thought for a moment that perhaps the Master Parridan really meant to kill him. Or perhaps this was not Gessayin. Perhaps some servant of the Destroyer...

He took a step backward, his face reddening as his starved lungs spasmed. Another step and he tripped over a branch and sprawled flat on his back on the damp earth. One of his hands found the branch and he clutched it desperately. The constrictor’s head hung directly over his own face, its cavernous mouth open in a long hiss. Then Krys brought up the branch and rammed it down the big snake’s gullet. The hiss turned to a startled choke, and the surroundings blurred again, leaving Krys on the floor of the study, with Gessayin himself sitting across the room, a balding elderly man ruefully rubbing his throat. He looked over at Krys reproachfully.

“Is that the best you could do?” the thick-featured old man said hoarsely. “Father of us all! If I could turn you into a hornet, you’d sting me! You could have used levitation, a countering illusion... lots of things.”

Krys bowed his head, still breathing heavily. “Forgive me, Gessayin. You... startled me. That was an... amazing illusion. So real!”

Gessayin looked pleased. “You liked it? Sometimes I regret becoming Temple Master. I’ve had little chance to keep in practice these days.” The Temple Master chuckled wickedly as Krys ran his hands through his hair and collapsed onto a chair.

“Scared you out of your breeches, didn’t I? And so I intended. You infants don’t seem to understand that those neckpieces are tools only. They are not your life’s blood, they just channel and focus Yerveyah’s power through you. If you were more skilled, you wouldn’t need to touch your torc to draw power. The power is in Yerveyah, not in a piece of beaten silver. Some of us seem to forget that lesson all too soon.”

“Perhaps that’s why the torcs have weakened,” commented Krys, trying to get his equilibrium back. Conversations with Gessayin usually required full attention.

“What do you mean?” asked Gessayin, eyeing him sharply.

“Well, ah... unless the old tales are greatly exaggerated,” replied Krys. “We can do little with the torcs nowadays compared to the feats our forebears performed.”

“What makes you think the torcs are the problem?” inquired Gessayin. “Perhaps the wearers are to blame.”

“That was my thought,” admitted his student with an uncertain smile. “But I did not wish to sound disrespectful. It is not for me to criticize the Tor parridae while I am yet a Novice.”

“Do not try to steer me, boy. We’ll discuss your visitor when I am ready.” Gessayin could not help laughing at his pupil’s abashed expression. “You’re so bad at it, Krys. It gives me pleasure to know it. Manipulation is a cruel art.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So, continue with your thoughts. You think the parridae degenerate? Speak freely.” Gessayin leaned back in his chair and folded his arms.

“Not degenerate, exactly, but if they cannot do what they once did, there must be a reason.”

“And what is your theory?”

“I do not know, sir. I have heard several. Some say it must be because many of the parridae are not pure in their Service. And I have heard others say that it is because we turned the government of Villagra over to the City Elders instead of ruling all things ourselves as Yerveyah intended.”

Gessayin nodded. “Go on.”

“The third idea is a corollary of the others. Perhaps our skills have faded because we use our powers selfishly, that only Villagra benefits while the rest of the world is in need.”

“Is that one of the ideas you have ‘heard’ or is it your own?”

Krys moved restlessly in his chair. “It is mine, Gessayin.”

The Temple Master was silent for a long moment, but the patterning Krys received from him was one of satisfaction, not anger.

“No one who comes to our gates in need is sent away,” remarked Gessayin at last, testing.

“True,” replied Krys. “But only those who come are served. Is not Yerveyah concerned with all men? We are the Chosen people. I have heard that phrase from childhood, but I never thought to question what it meant. Does not Chosen imply a purpose? Why should Yerveyah create a whole world full of people, then choose just one race to strengthen and cherish, while the aliens are not even allowed to speak his name? It doesn’t make sense.”

Gessayin nodded. “I am glad you have finally come to ask this question. It has been the aim of many of my talks with you. I have been trying to bring all the parridae into position of asking it since I became Temple Master. Why indeed?” The old man sat back in his chair and assumed a lecturing tone.

“It seems that any belief or creed that carries through generations eventually becomes clogged with tradition and ritual to the point where creed and custom cannot be distinguished.” He steeped his fingers and looked at Krys over the tips of them. “Did you know that there is no law forbidding aliens to speak the Name?”

Krys’ eyes widened. “What? But...”

“I know. You’ve been taught so since you came here. But I have searched and searched, and there is no such law, not even an oblique reference to it!” He paused to let that sink in. “Also, there is no law that prevents parridae from leaving Villagra to serve elsewhere.”

Krystan frowned. “I don’t think anyone ever said there was, it was just taken for granted... there is always so much to do here.”

“Exactly. And so no one leaves. Our people are strong and healthy, and the rest of the world, if it needs our help, must come to us.”

“But why? Surely leaving the City, though I shouldn’t like to do it myself, is not such a horrendous thing.” Gessayin smiled but said nothing. “Why,” Krys went on. “Should such a custom start?”

“That is precisely what I desire you to tell me,” said Gessayin, selecting a group of molding scrolls from the pile on his desk. “These are the history scrolls that seem pertinent to the question. We rarely use these scrolls in teaching as they deal mostly with events which we thought had no application today. The study of history has been somewhat neglected under my administration, I admit. I know it bores me no end. Perhaps that is part of the problem. Read these, and see if the outline of events does not suggest something to you.”

Krys received them dubiously. “Don’t any of the parridae go traveling?”

“A few have in our history, but nothing is written of how they fared. It troubles me that we know so little of what goes on around us, only what we hear through traders and travelers. And there have been fewer of those lately, have you noticed? The roads are apparently getting more dangerous and rumors come to us of bands of outlaws and evil sorcerers. Most of them are just tales of course, but I do feel a certain disquiet. At any rate, if Yerveyah is telling any of my current colleagues to venture into the unknown, they are not admitting it.”

Krystan smiled. “You have often said that it is the responsibility of those who perceive a problem to respond to the need.”

Gessayin grunted. “Don’t throw my own words at me. It would take a very large haeda to get me out of this study. The direction would have to be irrefusably clear.”

“You have also said that a parridan should not need a haeda sent to tell him when to p...”

“I’ve never said that to you!” Gessayin looked both embarrassed and outraged.

“The saying is attributed to you, sir,” returned Krys with a wide grin. “In fact, they’ve made it the refrain of a popular tavern song in the City, so I’ve heard.”

“That’ll teach me,” grouched the old man. “Never to relax with anyone. All I meant by it was that there are plenty of actions that are obviously the right thing to do and don’t need special sanction. Very well. If you are trying to direct me back to the subject of haeda again, you have succeeded. Tell me of this visitor of yours.” Gessayin settled himself more comfortably into his chair and watched through half-closed eyes as Krys self-consciously began his tale.

I know I am young for it, but a haeda visitation does mean I am a parridan. Gessayin knows that.

“It was beautiful,” Krys said aloud. “All white and the light seemed to go out of it somehow. Its wings were huge, almost to the ceiling, and they were white with rosy tips. I fell to my knees when I saw it, forgetting all the ritual greetings and everything. I don’t remember what I said, I just remember the haeda laughing and telling me to remember the vision it brought. Then it spread its hands and between them the air shimmered. I saw...” Krys hesitated, knowing his vision to be rather anticlimactic.

“What?”

“Well, it was rather short, sir. Five great ships sailing into our harbor. Their leader was a hooknosed foreigner with slanting eyes and a black beard. He and Elder Jeyrgon met, and gripped arms in friendship. That was all.”

Gessayin nodded and Krys felt relieved. "Yes, the vision, though prosaic, is a valid one. In fact, I have just received a message from the Council of Elders. A foreign captain is petitioning them even now for safe harbor for his five ships standing out to sea. A bad storm is heading up the coast and he fears his ships and cargo might not weather it. He offers a good price for harbor and the Elders are in unanimous approval, rare though that is. But since it is we of the Temple who maintain the Shield that protects the harbor entrance, they have come to me." He scratched his ear, glancing surreptitiously at Krys sitting in his chair with the patience that the Temple taught. The subtropical sun streaming in the window created dust haloes over them both, and lit up the tawny gold of Krys' hair.

The vision was valid, Krys told his teacher silently. So am I a parridan now? Say it!

"I have not seen my own haeda in some time," Gessayin said at last, ignoring his pupil's agitation. "It troubles me. I have the feeling that this Ringshadow will bring a vision that is new indeed. But I am old. I want young minds thinking on these things, minds that needn't wade through so much knowledge to find wisdom." He straightened up and looked at Krys; his eyes showed amusement.

"Study those scrolls and tell me your thoughts. If they aren't hopelessly stupid, I'll throw them in with mine and see what we end up with."

Krys stood, accepting his dismissal, but bitterly disappointed. His shoulders sagged as he turned to leave.

Gessayin hid a smile. "Oh, and Krys...?"

The young man turned quickly back to face him. "Sir?"

"You'll be invested tomorrow."

## CHAPTER TWO

*“And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”*

~ Exodus 19:6

The next day after midrest, Gessayin presided over a brief ceremony that was held in the Oval Chamber of the Temple, where Council meetings were usually held. Krystan Kregotson had finished his Novice training in the arts of patterning, healing, divining, defense and justice. His Gift of patterning had manifested and his primary numen, or creative talent, was shapeshifting. He could travel to and return safely from Endmoor, that mysterious plane at the edge of Death where the Destroyer brought minds to madness. He could read, write, dance, fight adequately with the sword and dagger, and could hunt with a bow. He knew manners and etiquette. He was well attuned to the milky torcstone, the snow diamond he wore, and at the last a haeda had come to signify Yerveyah’s approval of him. He was affirmed as one of the servants and protectors of Villagra, and all the Novices and their teachers were there to watch. His father, Lord Kregot of Redhaven, was in town for the council meeting and was present, taciturn and hardfaced as always; but in the set of his shoulders and the way he sat as if the whole ceremony was staged for his sole benefit, Krys knew his father was proud.

Krystan himself was heavy-eyed, having had very little sleep the night before. It was common custom for a graduating parridan to spend his last night in company with his former peers, warding off any numen magic they chose to throw at him. The Novices of course enjoyed this immensely, and outdid themselves for Krys, who was graduating earlier than seemed fair to them. It was a dubious honor at best. He had stretched, wan aspect the next morning as he was helped into the new blue robe of an initiate parridan. The bright teal-green color contrasted well with his maple-toned skin.

When the ceremony was complete, and the subsequent party had begun, Gessayin found himself face to face with one of the Council Elders, Jeyrgon, the one who had appeared in Krys’ vision. He was a portly man with a loud voice in Council, and a keener perception of and interest in precedence rather than people. He was, furthermore, no friend of Kregot’s, having more than once been the victim of the Lord of Redhaven’s dry wit. Gessayin had often tried to mediate between the two men and their factions, but Kregot would usually respond to his attempts with, “I am no longer of the Temple, Tor Gessayin, and can therefore be spiteful at my own desire.”

“Well, Gessayin,” said Jeyrgon importantly. “Have you thought over that matter we were discussing yesterday?”

“What matter is that?”

“The ships, man, the ships,” replied Jeyrgon with some impatience. “We must give this alien captain his answer forthwith. The storm is approaching.”

A tremor ran through Gessayin's torc, making him shudder. "I am still considering the idea," said the Temple Master slowly. "We know nothing of this man. Five ships could carry a lot of corsairs."

"Corsairs!" Jeyrgon laughed harshly. "Corsairs haven't landed here since the Shield was raised around the harbor. They know better than to attack the City of Yerveyah. You are, as always, overcautious." The Elder took a noisy sip from his cup. "I spoke to this Captain Harys. Prince of a fellow. Offered a handsome price for shelter. Told me I could inspect his holds myself, if I wished." The Elder leaned forward confidently. "You know, I've noticed some of the mosaics on the Healing Hall floor need replacing. This alien's money could stretch a long way, if we use it right."

Gessayin smothered a laugh.

"Come, sir, it's not as if it's so unusual," continued Jeyrgon with growing impatience. "Have you done no conjuring or divining, if you have such doubts? Have you had no speakings on the subject?"

"We've had one," said Gessayin with reluctance.

"Was it favorable?"

"It seemed to be, yes, but..."

"Well, there you have it!" Jeyrgon clapped his hands together and rubbed them as if it was all settled.

"But there's been no confirmation as yet, no verifi—"

"Come Tor Parridan, where is your faith? Have you so little confidence in your ability to protect Villagra, that you fear shadows?"

"Jeyrgon, the Shield is my responsibility," said Gessayin, nettled. "And if I bring it down it will not be solely because of a vague, indefinite vision seen by an initiate parridan."

"Initiate, you say?" Jeyrgon's florid face showed intense interest. "Then it must have been young Kregotson. If you give no credence to his vision, why did you confirm him as a parridan?"

Gessayin regretted the slip. "Because a haeda did come to him," he replied curtly. "And because I think he is ready. Now, if you will excuse me..."

"But... the Shield..."

"You may tell the Elders that the Shield will go down tomorrow on my responsibility, and at that time my people will be called to the Temple for defense drill."

"I tell you, Gessayin, that is not necessary. To interrupt Temple services... the inconvenience..."

"Nevertheless, it shall be done." Gessayin turned abruptly away and sought out a colleague of his who was called Lightbender for her ability to render objects invisible. Her Gift was defense.

He drew the tall, handsome woman away from the noise of the party. "How do your studies progress, my friend?"

Lightbender smiled. She was a brown woman. Eyes, skin and hair, all were the warm tone of mahogany. "Fairly well," she said. "It is easier to do magic when you understand what you're working with.' I have been studying the properties of

light. Those looking glasses you lent me are a valuable addition to my experiments. They are light benders also.”

“Good,” said Gessayin. “Perhaps you will soon be ready to make a presentation to the Novices.

“But I fear I may have to hold you from your work tomorrow. We will be dissipating the harbor Shield then, to admit those foreign ships. I want you out at the Port Tower.”

“Expecting trouble?”

“Not really. But I don’t appreciate the way the Elders handled this situation. A parridan should have been with Jeyrgon during the meeting and negotiation. He deliberately tries to cut us out of City affairs. I don’t want him to think we will stand aside where Villagra’s safety is concerned.”

Lightbender nodded briskly. “I will go down tonight.”

“No, no, tomorrow morning is soon enough to make our point. Take our new initiate with you. He needs to see how it’s done.”

Another parridan approached as Lightbender turned away.

“Well, Tara Shamar,” Gessayin said genially. “I can guess what you would speak with me about.”

“I need the boy on my staff,” the Patterner said, her round, motherly face anxious. “He has the sensitivity, and the insight, and he cares. His potential is beyond mine.”

“Fear not, good lady. On your staff he certainly shall be. But in return I would ask a favor of you. Tomorrow morning we will be dropping the Shield to admit some foreign ships. Go down then and inspect their holds, and pattern the captain. I would be sure of their intent.”

Shamar nodded. “Very well, old friend. But... foreigners! How does one distinguish evil intent from their normal patterns?” She grimaced and passed on towards the kitchens. Gessayin grinned and went in search of Krystan. He discovered the new parridan out in the garden sitting crosslegged under a shingle tree and watching the Novices’ games. He was thoughtfully chewing on a thick, triangular shingle leaf for the rich sap.

“Tired?” asked Gessayin, motioning for him to stay seated.

“Slightly,” admitted Krys. “I’ve got it under control. I can sleep in a bit tomorrow, unless I’m to be put on duty immediately.” His brows arched questioningly.

“Normally you’d be given tomorrow for rest. I know what initiation eves are like.” Gessayin smiled in remembrance of his own. “But the Shield is to be lowered tomorrow morning, and I want you there to see how it’s done. The maintenance of the Shield is the concern of every parridan, no matter what his Gift.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll go to rest soon then,” said Krys, and then added with a sardonic grin, “I’ll read myself to sleep with those scrolls you gave me.” He stretched out his legs in order to stand up, and Gessayin saw the marks of bruises on them.

“What happened to you?”

“Fell out of bed,” the young man muttered abashedly.

“Out of a floor pallet?? Admit it, boy, they levitated your bed, eh?”

Krystan looked shamefaced and Gessayin laughed heartily. "That trick is so old the stones know it. Let's see, what else? Afflict you with itches?"

"Yes."

"Animate your pallet to grab you in your sleep?"

"Blankets."

"Close enough. Have I missed anything?"

Krys sighed. "I have the questionable pleasure of reporting that our next generation of parridae will include a weatherworker."

"You mean Bayna? That's splendid. I thought he might be shaping up that way. That one is quite the jokester. I suspect him of putting a Binding on my bed linen the other night."

"What will you do in return?" asked Krys eagerly.

"My dear colleague," said Gessayin in affected hauteur. "Vengeance is not the province of the parridae. We are above such things."

Krys looked dubious. "Do you know what it's like to be rained on in your own bed?"

Gessayin laughed again. "I suppose it's safe to assume that that's why Bayna is such a lovely shade of green today."

"They didn't have it all their own way," was the easy response.

"I knew I didn't want to ask him about it, or I might have to take some official action. Well, it sounds like you had an exciting night."

"I haven't told you the worst of it yet."

"Please continue. I have a morbid curiosity about these things."

"About the darkest part of the night, I was awakened by something clicking down by my feet. I sat up and looked and saw the biggest bloodsucker I've ever seen in my life, crawling up my leg."

Gessayin's expression was scornful. "I'm surprised they bothered. If you can't dissipate a simple illusion by now, you're no parridan."

"Of course," agreed Krys. "I touched my torcstone and worked a dissipation on the bloodsucker. Then it sank its teeth into my leg."

Gessayin flung his head back and roared.

"I don't know how that colorless little menace got loose in the dormitory," Krys went on grimly. "But I'd like to find out."

Gessayin wiped his eyes, still chuckling. "Oh, I know I should not condone such activities, but I do so love to hear the stories later. Well, I must be off. Find Shamar when you're ready; she'll show you where your new quarters are.

"By the way," he added, somewhat shamefaced. "The fabric I gave Bayna for the last pair of breeches he wizard-wove is water-soluble. You might pass that on to the ladies."

"Yes, sir!"

Krystan awoke groggily the next morning with a small but intense orange light winking into his sleep encrusted eyes. As he sat up, the little ball of werelight snuffed itself out, its purpose accomplished. Quickly the new parridan arose and went to the window, drawing back the blue curtains. Light spilled into his new private sleeping room, far more luxurious than what he, as a Novice sleeping in a

dormitory, had been accustomed to. Actually the room was quite simple, containing little beyond the bed with a wooden clothing press at its foot, a desk, wall shelves, and a couple of wormlights. However, from the large window, with its deep, tiled sill, and built-in seat; and from the balcony, one could look out over the entire seaward quarter of the City, and view the fishing village. All the Novice dormitories were deep inside the massive building, and had no outside windows. Here he could see the green-blue sea, and the narrow band of the Ring, sparkling in the sun.

Krys stepped back from the balcony. Throwing back his head, he flung his hands out exuberantly, and stretched all his muscles. With an internal loosening of restraints, the living magic in him spread, like a wind through his body. As he took hold of it with the torcstone, runnels of white gold flame licked along his arms. He raised them slowly, and the flames rushed along the lines of muscle and tendon, hesitating at a stiff spot to whirl and eddy, and then moving swiftly onward. Slowly Krys exhaled, and the direction of the fire reversed, flooded over the bones of his wrists like water over a rock, and finally flowed off the tips of his fingers to dance towards the ceiling in a fountain of pleasure and praise. When he felt himself sufficiently expressed, Krystan let the power dissipate and lowered his arms, scoured clean in body and heart by the golden fire. Every parridan used his gifts in an individual way, and this particular rite was Krys' own discovery, for happiness was something he disliked keeping boxed inside himself. He also found his methods far superior to a basin of icy cold washing water.

My first day as a parridan! I must see if Father is still in the City. He sacrificed having an Heir to Redhaven so that this might be accomplished, and I have not yet properly thanked him.

Drawing on his shirt and breeches, and a new blue robe, Krystan went out to the hallway. He ran into Gessayin and Gaulkrin at a junction, and they each gave him a polite nod.

"Good morning, Tor Krystan. Going to breakfast?"

Krys' pleasure at the parridan honorific was heightened by Gessayin's gesture inviting him to accompany them. He fell in step behind, listening intently to the talk of those who shaped events in Villagra.

"So, Gaulkrin, what have we today?" Gessayin was saying to his aide.

"Well, sir, you have promised to meet with the Novice Master this morning to discuss some reorganization of his duties. Then attendance of the Council meeting after midrest..."

"No avoiding that, I suppose. While I'm thinking of it, send a Healer to the kitchens this morning. Tamys' arthritis is bothering her again and she threatens to ruin dinner unless I see to it."

Gaulkrin smiled. "I'll go down myself. And, while speaking of kitchens, you have the duty tonight."

The Temple Master grimaced. "So soon? Ahee... what else?"

"Elder Jeyrgon wishes to speak to you at your convenience."

"My convenience, hah! Can you not see him? I could arrange for us to trade appearances for a time."

"I fear not," his aide responded placidly. "No illusion can cover your caustic humor, though I do believe I could simulate your aversion to Jeyrgon with fair

enthusiasm. That colorless—" he broke off as a Healer approached the trio diffidently.

"Ah, Shassi," said Gessayin. "You have read my need, child. Just run down to the kitchen and see Tamys..."

"Forgive the interruption, sir," the young woman broke in, obviously ill at ease. "There is a foreigner in the Hall who insists upon speaking with you."

Gessayin frowned. "A foreigner? Find out what he wants, Shassi. I haven't the time."

"I tried, sir. He will speak only to you."

"Well, then he will wait long," returned Gessayin with an impatient gesture. "Tell him so. If I have leisure..."

"Excuse me, sir," Krys broke carefully in, pitying the her embarrassment. He stepped next to the Temple Master to regard her. "What is it about this foreigner, Tara Shassi, that troubles you so?"

Gaulkrin smiled broadly. "You do well, Tor Krystan, to remind Gessayin of his duty, and the courtesy due a fellow parridan. We who spend much time with you, O Leader, are not troubled by your temper, but Shassi has small experience with it."

The woman blushed and made a deprecating gesture as Gessayin bowed in elaborate apology.

"Forgive this rude old man, Tara Shassi, and tell what you will."

"He is wounded, sir, but will let none tend him. He insists on speaking with you, and when told that you are no Healer, says he came not for Healing. Three days he has sat in the Hall, while we waited for his stubbornness to wane, but the wound festers and still he will let no one near. His illness troubles our other sick ones, sir."

"Tricky," commented Gaulkrin. "He knows it would look bad to have him die in Hall, unhelped."

"But his need must be desperate, Gessayin," said Krystan. "Will you not see him?"

"Of course," said the Temple Master, who had listened to the story with dismay. "He has courage, for an alien."

"Shall I bring him up, then?" asked Shassi with visible relief.

"Certainly not! What do you think the Temple is coming to? I will go down."

Both Krystan and Gaulkrin accompanied the Temple Master to the Healing Hall, the latter from duty, the former from curiosity. Shassi led them through the large pillared Hall, full of spicy herbal smells, and the hushed voices of Healers and those they served. Curtained alcoves lined the Hall and and it was to one of these that Shassi let them. Before even they entered Krys could detect the odor of disease from within. He took a last breath of the clean air, and ducked his head to follow the others through the linen curtain that Shassi held open for them.

The man within had a Northern look to him; stocky and rough, with pale skin and thin, sandy hair. He sat with his wounded leg raised on a cushion, and used both hands to shift it carefully. His eyes raised to regard them with wary defiance. The fur and leathers he wore were well-made but filthy, torn and bloodsoaked.

"I was told you wished to speak with me," said Gessayin with somewhat perfunctory kindness.

"You are Master of the Temple?"

"I am."

The man stared at him closely, then a spasm of pain crossed his face, leaving him pale and weak. "The parridae do not lie," he muttered with bent head. Shassi stepped forward involuntarily, one hand outstretched, and the foreigner's head snapped up, his hand moved in a warding gesture. "No!"

"What nonsense is this?" said Gessayin impatiently. "Why do you come here only to deny our aid?"

"S'da shaddaio," muttered the stranger. It was already so. "I came not to be healed, but to be heard!"

Krys took a step back to divorce himself slightly from the group. In the close confines of the room, the foreigner's patterning echoed and rebounded like a scream in a sea cave. It required all of Shamar's teachings to suppress his sudden shaking, and he barely noticed Gaulkrin's sudden grip on his arm.

"So bad as that?" whispered the parridan with concern.

"I am Lyssand, of the Maretspah village. Your Villagran traders know of us."

Gessayin shrugged. "A small place, northeast of here, nearer to Lugash, I believe."

"Yes. For generations we have traded with your people to your profit, making the bright dyes for your cloth, among other things."

"I am no trader. What is your business with me?"

"Maretspah is no more. There is a new warleader risen, who men call Harrow. His fortress lies somewhere in the mountains up the Stranding River. All the lands around have learned to fear him. He commands a great force of men, with alliances in the East, and sends captives to his mines in the mountains to serve as slaves in arming and equipping his men. Some weeks ago, we heard that Lugash had been taken, and we readied ourselves for defense. But even in war men must eat, and I was chief hunter of our village." His voice fell. "So it was that I was not with my people when we were attacked. I heard their cries in the distance, and saw the smoke of burning. I ran until my lungs ached, but it was over when I arrived. The village was destroyed, my own house a torched ruin."

Krys sat down abruptly, in the Healer's chair, wanting to block his ears against the man's pain. Through his shields came flickers of images; the smoke shrouded ruins, the charred bodies of two small children amid the rubble.

"My children were dead... of my wife I found no sign. The bodies of my townfolk lay about, with no sign that they had resisted at all, no broken weapons at hand, no bent shields could I find anywhere. They were driven from their homes and slaughtered like animals."

"How strange," muttered Gessayin, sympathies aroused.

"Not strange, impossible!" cried the man. "My people were not warriors, but they were brave, and desperate. We were willing to sell our lives dearly. There was only one explanation for it, and other rumors that we had discounted as ridiculous now came back to my mind." He paused as another wave of pain silenced him, but another voice spoke his thought.

"Sorcery," said Krystan.

The foreigner looked up, painfully shifting his leg.

"You have said it," he responded quietly. "Harrow is a sorcerer. I did not come to this thought immediately. I followed the trail of the raiders, to pay my blood debt. I came upon their rear guard in the night. I slew two, but the others came upon me, and you see their work. The left me for dead, but my debt was not paid, and I could not die. In the days when I hung between worlds, these thoughts came to me, and I turned aside from my debt, for I knew of but one City where such powers may be defied."

"We are not warriors," said Gaulkrin.

"You were once," retorted the stranger angrily. "You poured yourselves out over all the land once, shouting the name of your God, and once the drunkenness of conquest had left you, you ruled well."

"The parridae were not formed to rule, but to serve," said Gessayin. "When we learned that lesson, we went home. This is the City of God, and we serve here."

"But Gessayin," Krys broke in. "You said it was we who must—"

"Give that time, Krys," said Gessayin, turning to him. "We may leave Villagra in time, but not to spread death."

"I do not ask you to spread death, but life," said Lyssand through clenched teeth. "This sorcerer—"

"We have no proof that he is a sorcerer, merely rumors," interjected Gaulkrin. "If he comes to Villagra, he will be met."

Gessayin nodded in agreement. "I will not stain the hands of my folk with blood, be it good or evil." He turned as if to leave. "You are welcome to seek refuge among us. But we will not pay your 'blood debt' for you. The parridae cannot use their powers to kill, or their powers will fail. That is our law."

"We cannot help your village," said Shassi gently, reaching out to him. "But we can help you."

A convulsion of rage shook the man, and he jerked himself to his feet, pushing the Healer aside, and limping heavily as he made for the door.

"Bah!" he shouted. "I spit on your help. And I spit on your God who would nurture you delicate hothouse flowers, healing your little cuts and bruises while he lets my folk die."

"So typical of aliens," said Gaulkrin acidly. "They give no Service to God, then spit on him when he gives no aid."

"Let him give the aid," snapped Lyssand. "Then we might have reason to serve!" A circle of Healers and curious Villagrans was forming about him, but he glared his way through them. "Complacent fools!" he said contemptuously. "Lackeys of a doddering faith. Wait until the sorcerer comes to you!"

"We are the Chosen," said Gaulkrin dangerously.

"A curse upon you!" cried the stranger, limping away. "May you truly learn what it is to be Chosen!"

## CHAPTER THREE

*“For calamity from God is a terror to me.”*

~ Job 31:23

There was a long and uncomfortable silence after the wounded man had departed, then Gessayin turned to leave.

“Come along,” he said quietly. Krys followed the two men to the refectory, his appetite gone, his head full of questions. Had Gessayin done rightly by refusing the man from Maretspah? If the Temple Master’s views on the parridae leaving Villagra were true, then perhaps this had been a call from Yerveyah and they would come to regret having ignored it. On the other hand, how could it be? The parridae could not fight in a war, and if they all went off to protect other countries, who would protect Villagra? If that was what Yerveyah desired, then the number of parridae in Villagra would have been becoming more, not less. How could one know a true call from a false? Krys shrugged to himself and attempted to drop the thought. Gessayin was Temple Master. He ought to know.

But what if he was wrong?

“All I know is,” muttered Villagra’s newest parridan. “I feel like Gessayin. If Yerveyah wants me to leave Villagra, he’d better make the call a loud one.”

His thoughts nagged him all through breakfast until Lightbender broke them up when she came to take him down to the jetty to dissipate the Shield. At the sound of her comradely greeting he cheered up and tried to eat his remaining portion quickly. She led him out of the refectory as the parridae and Novices all departed to their various duties and lessons.

Krys dropped diffidently behind her as they stepped out into the sunlight. In spite of her unfailing friendliness he was still a bit awed by her. She was a Bearer, and as such, was treated with reverent respect by all Villagrans.

In ancient times, the servants of Yerveyah had offered in sacrifice the blood of animals to expiate all wrong and disobedience. But when Taleissyn, the first parridan, was established by Yerveyah, that rite was changed. In modern times, three days before the end of the spring Ringshadow, a Bearer was chosen. Often a parridan, but not always, the Bearer was seated in the gate of the Temple. During the course of the day, all in the City who wished, passed by the Bearer and, with a touch and a prayer, laid all the weight of the year’s evil upon that One. At nightfall, too burdened to walk, the Bearer was carried to the catacombs beneath the City and left in the darkness, without food, for three days. On the third day, Ringshadow ended, the sun returned, and there was a great festival. The Bearer was brought forth and given a new name; the old name used only as one would speak of the dead. The haeda say that this rite is but a symbol of the true sacrifice which is to come. The people don’t understand, but for the most part, they obey.

As might be imagined, Lightbender looked somewhat older than her thirty-six years.

She blinked as they came out into the brilliant sunlight. "It's a lovely morning. It's hard to believe that tomorrow the sky will be black with storm."

"Shall we ride down or fly?" asked Krys somewhat wistfully.

"We ride. Sorry, Krys, but if I try and shapeshift I have no strength left for anything else. I've no talent for it."

The two parridae passed through the Temple complex, taking outside ways whenever possible, for the day was pleasant. Lightbender plucked a blossom from a bush. The orange of it was nearly eye-searing as she set it in her brown hair. Krys, brooding over his thoughts, asked,

"Lightbender, how long has it been since last your haeda came to you?"

Her eyes became vaguely troubled. "Strange that you should ask. It has been some time. But only last night, I awoke out of a sound sleep, thinking I had heard Saelim calling my name. I did not see her. But I still felt... I don't know, as if she was trying to reach me." She gave an embarrassed laugh. "I know that sounds strange. What could keep Saelim from me if she was needed?"

"Does the Destroyer have the power?"

"I don't know. I have never heard of such a thing. That would be evil indeed."

Upon their arrival at the stables, Lightbender and Krystan picked up two mounts from the hostler, and descended slowly into the seaward quarter of the City. The streets were fairly crowded, this being a market day, but the pedestrians gave way for them courteously, and many were the friendly greetings tossed to the parridae, especially to the new initiate. Many times Krys was stopped to make acquaintance, for the city people liked to know all their parridae by sight and touch. Lightbender smiled at his flushed face and bright eyes.

"This is a great day for you," she said.

"It is wonderful! Good morning, Cerina-Juherys! Yes, it is true at last... I thank you. May his gifts come to you as well."

The sun was well above the horizon, and Ringrise was complete when the two parridae arrived at the Port Tower. As Krys looked south, he could see the brown skins of Villagrans sporting in the waves, and lying on the beach. He wished he, too, could take a quick swim before stormclouds covered the sun. A number of parridae gathering out on the jetty, either as assistants or observers, were silhouetted against the shimmering distortion of the Shield. One of them, a Mender named Ishnamaour, approached Krys.

"I have been waiting for you," the Mender said. "Gessayin sent a message out to the Port Tower for you. He requests that you return to the Temple as soon as dissipation is complete. There is a patterning in which you are to assist."

"Very well. Thank you, Tor Ishna."

Lightbender raised her arms and a flash of white light drew everyone's attention to her. The parridae drew into a close circle around her and she said briskly,

"Those of you who are here observing as students should know that the Shield was raised here by Taleissyn, back in the days of the pirate fleets, to keep the City safe from attack by sea. Our fishing fleet is small enough to go in and out through the locks by the fishing village, but no larger ships can get through unless

the Shield is dissipated. Dissipating the Shield is a very simple operation. It is the building of it that is not so simple." A couple of the older parridae chuckled. "All that is required now is that we loose the wards that keep it intact." Several men and women took positions along the nearly invisible boundary of the Shield. "Now monitor, please. You see the lines of force along here. And here, the focus. Now these four apply a jolt of pressure right... there!"

There was a crackling snap and a whoosh of rushing air, and Krys' ears popped.

"The Shield is down," announced Lightbender. "It will remain down until the foreign ships and our own fishing fleet are within. At noon, regather here and we will rebuild it." The crowd broke up into small chattering groups, and Lightbender turned to Krys with a tolerant smile. "Why don't you fly on back, and I'll bring your horse along. Wouldn't do to keep the Temple Master waiting."

"You are too indulgent, Tara." He smiled shyly. "But I thank you. I'll grow up some day."

"No need to denigrate an innocent pleasure, my boy. Go on now."

Krys touched his snow diamond, and a look of intense concentration crossed his face. Then his form shrank and blurred, and the small grey seabird circled Lightbender's head twice before winging up toward the Temple. It worked up to full speed, and then swooped dizzily under an archway before climbing again and settling into a relaxing glide. Whether, as parridae liked to argue, his shapeshifting was an illusion that gave all the practical aspects of reality, or whether his mass and form had actually changed, mattered not at all to him. He could fly, and he was still new enough at it to feel the wonder.

He was singing softly as he resumed his human form in the courtyard outside Gessayin's study. Healing, judging, patterning; they were all part of the parridan's calling, but it was the latter that gave Krys the most pleasure: to reach into his folk, and find their secret strengths and talents, and help to draw them forth; to see the motives and patterns of their behavior and be a mirror for them, helping them to understand themselves. Sensitive fingers touched the silver band at his throat as Krys sent a swift prayer to Yerveyah for wisdom.

Gessayin was sitting on the bench outside his study, enjoying the sunshine. "Ah, there you are, Krys. Go on inside. It's just a small marriage problem."

Krys looked stricken. "You're joking, I hope."

The Temple Master laughed heartily at his dismay. "Yes, although I'm sure you'd handle it well enough. No, it is a child within. Her parents are smallholders across the river; old family friends of mine with parridae in their ancestry. They plan to make a dairy maid of her, but she's an intelligent girl, so they decided to send her here first to make sure they hadn't missed some great potential. They often do with girls, you know. And as I am much too busy to be bothered with such trivia..." here he stretched his long arms out along the bench back and yawned. "And as Shamar is otherwise occupied... you take care of it for me. I'll see her when you're finished. I often have nightmares about running across one that isn't good for anything."

Krystan gave him a mock bow. "Your servant, O Exhausted One."

Gessayin gave an amused grunt. "Have you read over those scrolls yet?"

"I read some of them last night. They are confusing and incomplete. All I really noticed was that we used to be a lot more bloodthirsty than we are now."

"No judgements, please," Gessayin said, raising a languid hand. "What did you read of?"

"Conquest, mostly. Records of battles fought for the glory of Yerveyah, cities subjugated, tribute brought back to the Temple, and suchlike. The parridae certainly traveled back then. From Wintersea to the Southern Wastelands and east to Sha and Nivan, all the land was under our rule. There were records of parridae stationed in the conquered cities to rule and protect."

"And then?" prompted the Temple Master.

"And then nothing. Several hundred years ago it just stopped. No more mention of other cities, just Villagra. What happened? You said this morning to the foreigner that we were not formed to rule, but to serve. Is that what they learned?"

"I was not there," Gessayin shrugged. "So I can only conjecture. But I do know this. Yerveyah does not want conquered slaves, he wants free hearts. And we are not meant to use our powers to kill. Perhaps our ancient fathers realized their zeal was misplaced."

Krys' eyes widened in sudden comprehension. "So they went home, perhaps to cure the ills in themselves, creating a tradition of seclusion and non-involvement. And you feel that now we have taken that too far?"

"The signs are there. The haeda are drawing away from us. Fewer Novices are successfully completing their training. Weakened powers, lethargy. I mean no slight to your skills, my boy, but what is shapeshifting but an entertaining trick? Where are the parridae who could control earthquakes, floods and forest fires?"

Krys was silent for a moment. "Why hasn't he told us?"

Gessayin grinned ironically. "Maybe he has. But why should we need a haeda sent to tell us when to..."

Krys laughed and signaled surrender. "You are the Temple Master," he said. "What do you propose to do? I saw no eagerness to involve ourselves in the affairs of foreigners displayed in the Healing Hall this morning."

"I will not be rushed into anything," said Gessayin with a frown. "This is a serious matter and it is too close to Ringshadow to be making such decisions. But whatever I decide, I believe it must start with the new parridae. That is why I am telling you; I want you to go through Ringshadow with these things on your heart. I will be telling others as well."

Krys shook his head. "I don't know... this is so much to think of. Perhaps if there were more of us..."

"I am sorry," Gessayin apologized. "I should not be orating at you with a patterning before you. Go in, I'd like to finish this before midrest."

Krys nodded. "I will continue thinking on what you have said." He turned to the study door, hesitated, looked suspiciously at Gessayin, then peered in. The study walls showed no signs of turning into anything else, so he entered.

A young girl inside straightened to attention. She was about thirteen years old, small and slender, with swinging wheat-colored hair, and freckles that showed blotchily through her tanned skin. She smiled shyly as Krys spoke his name and told

him that hers was Jessa. Krys seated himself in his favorite position, crosslegged at the foot of her chair, where he could look up into her solemn face.

“So. You are to be a dairy maid,” he began.

“Yes, Tor Krystan.”

“And is that your wish also?”

“My family wishes it. I think it will be well enough.”

“Your family has sent you here to find out what you wish. Is there a life you feel more suited for?”

“No, sir.”

“Hmm. Would you tell me if there was?”

The girl hesitated. “Tor Parridan, I know no other. My mother said that the parridae could read minds, that they— you could tell me what I could do best.”

Krys shook his head. “I don’t read minds, teki, I know only what Yerveyah tells me. And if you can trust him to tell me only what it is good for me to know, then I will ask for a vision for you.” He made the ritual gesture of the patterner, ending with his hands reaching for hers. “Will you allow me, Jessa?”

She had obviously been coached for this part; her eyes widened nervously in recognition of the phrase, but her hands lifted in the proper response as she said, “The touch of the parridae is the gift of Yerveyah.”

Gently he enfolded her small hands in his, his thoughts flashing back to the appearance of his Gift. He had been only fourteen at the time, and the strength of the Gift’s manifestation had nearly overwhelmed him.

He had been sitting with Shamar when a very quiet woman had come to her. Something in the woman’s sad voiced had triggered him, and it had ended with him being held in Shamar’s ample embrace, sobbing under the impact of the woman’s personal guilt and sorrow. The woman wept anew as she hear from the lips of the boy not only the story of her own pain, but the grief and shame of the man whose pride made him unable to respond to her as his wife. Krys had babbled on until exhausted, unable to stop or control the flood of rapport.

Shamar had taken him under her personal tutelage after that, teaching the boy to curb his empathic responses; to accept the knowledge without being swamped and lost under the impact of someone else’s personality. Though the knowledge he gained from then on made his growing up uncomfortably sudden, the rewards were worth it. The folk that came to a patterner were the troubled, the guilty, the bitter, sometimes the mad. Krys no longer yearned to be a Healer, for in a way, he was one.

He sent his awareness through the torc.

Magic of Yerveyah, show me the truth.

Jessa’s eyes fixed on the faint glow in the snow diamond’s heart. She sighed and moved closer to him as his sending of warmth/reassurance/acceptance reached her, and lowered her barriers.

Such a calm and orderly little sister you are. Such intelligence and spirit. What are you doing with the dairy beasts, teki? You should be off organizing and systemizing to your spirit’s content. It is not stable walls I see around you, but paneled halls, cupboards and pantries, servant’s faces. Questions coming at you fast and furious, enough to twirl your head, yet you laugh because they do not.

At last he withdrew slowly, and met the child's sea-grey eyes, wide with fear. "Was it so bad?" he asked in surprise.

Jessa shook her head. "Oh, no! But I... when you held my hand, it..." she broke off helplessly.

Krystan eyed the girl gravely. There was parridan blood in her. "What did you see?"

"I don't know. Shadows... a grey stone wall... and black wings beating. I know it sounds silly," Jessa added humbly. "But suddenly I wanted to protect you."

Krys did not laugh. "Why?"

"You have never been hated before."

Krys stared into space for a long moment.

"That's all there was," said Jessa at last. "Do you know what it means?"

"No, I don't," replied Krys, rising to his feet. "I shall have to talk to Gessayin about it. Meanwhile, if you are in favor, I would like to look into having you apprenticed to Elder Esvald's housekeeper, Cameron, at Jademill. Your gifts would be wasted in a barn. She needs a likely girl to train up and hasn't found one yet. I think you will suit her. We'll just have to see."

Jessa's eyes glowed. "I don't know anything about it, but... I'd like to try."

"Good. Let me bring in Gess..." he broke off and stumbled suddenly, sitting down abruptly in Gessayin's chair.

"Tor Krystan! What is it?" Jessa asked, frightened.

At that moment the study door burst open and Gessayin entered. All the color was washed from his face, and he clutched at his chest spasmodically.

"Sir!" gasped Krystan. "What is it? What's hap—"

"Shamar..." Tears were pouring down the old man's cheeks.

"She's dead."

## CHAPTER FOUR

*“A rebuke goes deeper into one who has understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.”*

~ Proverbs 17:10

Shock spread through Krys like a Wintersea wave, numbing even his speech.

“Dead... how?” he stammered.

“Treachery,” groaned the Master Parridan. “Treachery or sorcery. How else could a parridan be overcome? That colorless captain has deceived us.” He stood heavily to his feet, pushing away grief with a desperate will. “I will summon the parridae at once. We must prepare for defense.”

Krystan held him back. “But, Gessayin... the haeda, it told me he was a friend.”

Gessayin looked at him bleakly. “Did it say that? Think again. Visions cannot lie, but they can deceive. You didn’t test it, did you?”

Krys paled. “N-no, I didn’t think to... it was so beautiful, how could it be anything but good?”

Gessayin shook his head despairingly. “It is my fault. I didn’t think to ask. It never occurred to me that you, of all my students, would not test a vision.”

“What are you saying?”

“It must have been a daemon. A true haeda would not have allowed you to misinterpret its vision.”

Krystan thought back urgently. What had he seen? Five ships sailing... Harys gripping Jeyrgon’s arm in friendship. That had already happened. Now the Shield was down... suddenly he felt even colder.

Gessayin gently freed himself from Krystan’s grip, and turned to leave the study.

You didn’t test it, did you?

Krystan bowed his head into his hands. Oh, Yerveyah, what have I done? If I’d tested it, I would have known the vision was misleading; I could have warned Gessayin!

A small movement in the room made him raise his head with a jerk. Jessa had come out of the corner and was regarding him with a mixture of fright and sympathy.

“Go, child,” he told her hoarsely. “Find the kitchens. You’ll be safe there. If you see anyone in a blue robe, send them to Gessayin in the Oval Chamber.” She disappeared, and Krys fell on his knees in desperate prayer.

The Council of Elders was in session when Gessayin burst into their midst with the terrible news. Close on his heels came a runner from the harbor, bearing

news of the five ships full of fighting men who were now burning and taking captives along the seaward quarter.

"Precious cargo indeed!" cried Gessayin. "Five holds stuffed full of corsairs! And it must be a sorcerer who leads them. No doubt when Jeyrgon inspected the holds he saw only bales of cloth, but Shamar could not have been fooled. This Harys..." he stopped and clutched at his brow. "Harys... Harrow?"

"That is the name!" cried the runner. "The pirates shouted it as they came."

"And I did not heed the warning!" Gessayin muttered. "Has Cirone been sent for?" he demanded of the room in general.

The Elders were milling in consternation, but the runner replied, "The City Guard Commander was on hand when the attack started. He is organizing men for defense now."

"Good. Go to him," instructed Gessayin. "Ask how the parridae can best aid him. He knows our limits."

"What of this Harrow, this sorcerer?" quavered one of the Elders. "If he so easily vanquished an experienced parridan, how can Cirone be expected to defeat him?"

"A servant of the Void," said Gessayin harshly. "Alas, the parridae cannot use their powers to kill. But our powers of defense are great, and with Yerveyah's help we will drive these foreigners out."

"And what of the invader in our midst?" asked a strong voice from the end of the chamber. It was Jeyrgon. "What is the penalty for false prophecy?"

A babel of anxious queries greeted this challenge.

"There's no time for that now," said Gessayin impatiently.

"Is it true, then?" asked one of the Elders. "Your new initiate foresaw friendly relations with the pirates?"

Kregot started at this and looked to Gessayin in alarm.

"The vision was not in error, merely the interpretation. The fault is my own."

"But no true haeda came to him then," said another Elder. "He is no parridan."

"This is not the time!" cried Gessayin over the rising tumult. "After we rid ourselves of these pirates these things will be decided."

A yellow-clad Novice pushed his way into the room. "Tor Gessayin!" he cried. "Pirates are attacking the City! They have killed the Harbor Master and his men. Our fishing fleet is burning with a sorcerous fire that water cannot quench. What are we to do?" A rising tide of sound was coming through the windows as alarm spread through the City. The Elders gabbled like frightened chicks. Having bought their offices, or been chosen for administrative abilities, they had no precedent for action in a City which had never in their lives been in danger. Unable to face the menace from without, they turned upon the one within.

"The penalty for false prophecy is death!" cried a hysterical voice.

"The boy's arrogance has destroyed us all!" shouted Jeyrgon, his mottled face purpling to clash with his velvet robes. "You cannot shield your favorites, Gessayin. He has let in the Destroyer upon us."

There was a shouted mixture of agreement and protest from the rest of the Council. Suddenly, they fell silent, for the doors had quietly opened, and Krystan

himself had entered the room. He was deathly pale under his tan, and it was obvious that the enormity of his mistake was clear to him. His father rose involuntarily at the sight of the young man's face.

"Look at him!" cried Jeyrgon scornfully. "His guilt needs no patterner to be seen. What is the penalty for false prophecy, young Kregotson?" He glanced sidewise at the Lord of Redhaven as he spat the final word.

Whatever reply Krys might have made was lost in Kregot's roar of protest.

"That is insane, Jeyrgon!" blazed Gessayin. "That law was intended for those who intentionally linked with the Destroyer. The boy's vision had nothing to do with my decision to lower the shield. It was my decision, and your recommendation!"

"Nevertheless," said another of the Elders. "If the vision was deceiving, it was no true haeda. The boy is no parridan, and therefore a danger to us. Take his torc from him and send him out to fight with the cityfolk."

"It is not your decision to make," grated Gessayin. "We may have turned the rule of the City over to you, but the parridae are ruled by Yerveyah!"

Krystan slowly moved to the center of the room, like a prisoner at a trial. There was a trembling in all his limbs, and his stomach felt sick. To the others he seemed unhearing, disassociate. But inside, Krys was absorbing every word and each bitter eye that turned upon him. Every accusing finger was a lance that stabbed through him, for he would not shield himself against the overwhelming atmosphere of panic/fear.

I have let the Destroyer in upon my own folk.

More of the parridae were crowding into the room behind him, in response to Gessayin's summons, adding their queries to the confusion.

"The laws regarding parridae were given to you by Yerveyah, or so you say," said Jeyrgon pompously, sensing the strength of his position. "And they are clear on this point. A parridan who heeds a daemon is flawed and a danger to his order."

"The law itself reads that it is our servant, not our overlord," said one of the Temple Novices, Gorion, who had come in with the runner. He moved forward and grasped Gessayin's arm. "Please sir, you mustn't send Krystan away. He is the best of us."

Gessayin turned his face away in helpless frustration.

"Remove that child," said one of the Elders angrily. "This is not a nursery. We must plan our defense."

"Make an end of this, Tor Gessayin," shouted Elder Esvald. "We are wasting valuable time."

Gessayin strode forward to Krys' side.

"Was it at my request that this nonsense started, that my time is wasted while our folk are left to shift for themselves?" he asked furiously. "All of us stand a good chance of being killed or enslaved, this boy included, and yet that us not good enough for Jeyrgon. He must see Krystan shamed because his father opposes Jeyrgon in council, a move so obvious that I don't understand why you stand still for it!" He looked contemptuously at the Elders, who were stunned anew by his fury which they had never before experienced.

"I should walk out on all of you now," the Master Parridan went on. "I want no part of this. But I made a vow to serve, and there are more lives to think of than yours. If you must have the letter of the law, Jeyrgon, then you shall have it. Krystan Kregotson—" his voice caught. "Krystan is no longer a parridan; his torc shall be removed. But know, Jeyrgon, that you have lost your place as well, for I will have nothing further to do with you, and I know well which of us this Council needs more!"

Jeyrgon sat back in his chair, smug and undisturbed by Gessayin's threats. Krys' father was struggling through the crowd towards his son. When Jeyrgon saw that, he rose and approached the young man also.

Krys stood as a block of stone amid all the movement around him, staring at the floor. He did not raise his head as his father faced him. All he could think of was how he had failed. Failed Gessayin, failed his father, failed everyone.

How could I have been such a fool? The testing of spirits is a basic assumption!

Gessayin walked over to him, but Jeyrgon was there as well, and Krys looked up in time to see Kregot's face flood with anger.

Krys flinched as Jeyrgon reached out for the band of silver, for Krys' torc. He stumbled back against his father, his appearance of indifference gone. As the Councilman's fingers touched the snow diamond a jolt of pain shot through Krys so quickly that he was unable to even cry out. His body arched and convulsed and he collapsed onto the floor. Suddenly, both his father and Gessayin were blocking Jeyrgon.

"Not like that, you fool!" said Gessayin. "You've done enough here. This task is mine." He knelt and slipped a supporting arm around Krys. Looking back over his shoulder, Gessayin said, "Gaulkrin, get the others all in here, and tell them what's happened. Send someone down to the harbor for details. I will be right back. Kregot, assist me." He turned compassionate eyes on Krys, who felt the pain fade away as though wiped off with a cloth. His eyelids grew irresistibly heavy, and he slept.

When he awoke, his torc was gone, his father was absent, and so, he felt, was half of himself. He was alone with Gessayin in one of the small rooms off the Chamber, and Gessayin held him as he wept. Once his tears had congealed into a hard ball within him, Gessayin gave him weapons saying,

"Do not throw away your life in anger or haste, my boy. Your father has gone down to find Cirone. He wishes you to join him there. Find me after the battle is won and we will see what can be done." Sorrowfully, he followed Krys to the door. "Don't despair, Krys. Remember that Yerveyah forgives, even when man does not."

The crowd in the Oval Chamber made way for Krys, and even the Elders were moved to pity, for Krys moved as one deaf and blind.

"Perhaps, after the battle..." an Elder said hesitantly.

"Be silent!" snapped Jeyrgon. Krys' head came up at the sound of his voice, and he went to stand before Jeyrgon. The crowd became so silent that the swish of the new blue robe as it dropped at the Elder's feet was clearly audible. Jeyrgon did not react, merely looked at Krys with cold eyes.

This is more than family rivalry, thought Krys. He hates me... or hates parridae. But why? No patterning came to him. He was sick and shaking, and everything was senseless. He turned and stumbled blindly out the door.

"Yerveyah, protect him," Gessayin said quietly. "You made this law, now justify it."

Joining the crowd in the Oval Chamber, the Temple Master looked around. As he did, a cormorant flew in the window and changed into a young woman.

"The cityfolk are fighting, Tor Gessayin," she said, leaning wearily on his arm. "Cirone is attempting to organize them. The pirates are badly outnumbered, and are spending much effort in taking captives in the seaward quarter. It does not appear that this is an attempt at conquest, merely a raid."

Gessayin frowned. "Then why the sorcerer? There are far easier targets than Villagra for the taking of slaves. Surely they do not think the parridae will let them escape free. We will call the wind and blow them back to the harbor, freeze it to the pier. This Harrow must be testing himself against us." He shook himself. "Never mind, Cirone can deal with the pirates. We must deal with the sorcerer. Tara Shassi, you must fly down to Cirone again. Tell him the parridae will overpower and hold this Harrow until the City Guardsmen can seek out and kill him."

Shassi nodded, and the cormorant once more took to the air. But as it swept out the window, a horrible cry broke from its beak, and it charred before their eyes, filling the room with the reek of burning.

"A traspell!" shouted Gessayin sprinting for the door. He stopped just short of it, senses alert. Gaulkrin came alongside him.

"It is here also," said Gaulkrin. "It is all around us. We are immobilized."

Ishnamaour knelt down by the dead bird; picked it up gently. "She had no chance," he whispered. "Curse that sorcerer!"

"Won't our powers break us free?" asked Lightbender. "We can't let him pin us here."

"Yes!" shouted Ishna. "If my magic cannot destroy him, my hands will serve!"

"We can try," said Gessayin. "Gaulkrin, take several others and try to form some sort of shield for that window. A one-way traspell indicates that he may send other things in upon us. The rest of you, to me. Let us link our gifts. Hold nothing back. We must break free!"

## CHAPTER FIVE

*“Reproach has broken my heart and I am so sick.”*

~ Psalms 69:20

Krystan rolled over and groaned. He had a kink in his neck, a lump on his head, and his mouth tasted like a stable yard. But worst of all was the weakness, nausea, and dimming of perception caused by the loss of his torc. Separation shock was temporary, but the removal of his torc and the circumstances surrounding it would be with him forever.

At the moment when Gessayin had sent him away, he had felt that things could get no worse, but as he joined the townspeople at the waterfront in hand-to-hand combat with Harrow’s raiders, feeling sick shame every time he caught a townsman’s frightened, confused glance of recognition, he truly felt the impotence of his state. All around, people were killed or carried off to the ships, and he had no magic to help them. Next to him, a Villagran had collapsed, pierced through the lung by a pirate’s sword. Krystan had automatically reached out to mend the torn tissues and clear fluid from the lung, but no power came at his call. The man had died in his arms, eyes staring horribly as he fought for breath that would not come, blood flooding over Krys’ hands. Then a cudgel had descended upon Krys’ head.

Half-stunned, he was taken and thrown into the stinking slavehold of Harrow’s flagship. The floor was slimy with bilge water, crowded with bodies, and with the fetid, stinking air, and the constant movement of the ship, there were few even of the seaborne who had not been ill as yet.

Automatically Krystan adjusted his eyesight to darkness, and as he did so, was doubled over by another flood of sickness. Even the skills that did not require the power of the torc were reeling with its loss. He dared not reach out with his spirit to probe his surroundings. Until now, swordplay had always been a game and a sport, with no worse injuries than cuts and bruises. For the reality of battle he was unprepared. By the time he had raised his sword to use it, it had been knocked from his hand.

Krys closed his eyes and pulled in his shields tightly, until he could harden himself to ignore the miseries of those around him he could neither bear nor ease. Inside, his own thoughts betrayed him as well. Behind his eyelids he saw broken bodies bent at crazy angles, torn limbs, and dead staring faces; his ears heard echoing screams of dying men and stolen women; and his heart reproached him constantly with the beauty of the spirit that had deceived him.

Finally, unable to bear it, he fled into Endmoor. He stood on the grey moor, under the unwinking stars, and gazed out over the low stone wall that living men do not cross. At the edge of the horizon, the Beacon shown as always, its light a constant call to all the parridae. Though he knew at this point death was forbidden him, he hovered on its borders hopefully, absorbing from afar its aura of rest and healing.