

Chapter 3

Retribution

Warrior was an hour above the Western horizon, his fierce blue rays diffused by low cloud. Above cloud, warm Mother continued to bestow her orange ambience on the earth below. The road from Stil was empty, and the group of Elders waiting by the roadside just outside Zant village were beginning to look a little less apprehensive, but nevertheless continued to gaze at the forest from which the road emerged.

Behind them, within the circle of houses, around the central obelisk, several smaller groups of villagers stood in conversation. The groups broke, and re-formed, as individuals left one group to join another. The atmosphere was pervaded by a sense of expectancy, overlaid with tension. No children were visible within the central clearing, though small faces could occasionally be seen peering around partially open doors.

Z'Tan sat with his mother, on her cot, not his usual ebullient self - in fact, a very subdued urchin. Not quite an urchin today, however. His faded trousers had been replaced with a pair made of stout canvas, scorch marks and coal smears testifying to his occupation at the blacksmith's anvil. Gone too was the weskit. A plain sleeveless vest, old but clean, covered his upper frame, and a sweat-stained rag tied around his brow completed the impression of a hard-working apprentice who would never dream of stealing E'ranj - or even fish-hooks - from honest market vendors. The cheeky, toothy, grin was not in evidence either.

S'Lin saw the apprehension on her son's face, mirroring her own, but deliberately refrained from attempting to restore his confidence. Better a frightened lad, as was proper before a Mage, than an over-confident boy who might stir the Mage's ire - and suspicions. They had rehearsed their stories for hours - Z'Tan, Z'Kal, and herself. There was no concealing the fact that yesterday had been his tenth-day. All the lads in the village were given time off on the same day, and it would be easy for the Mage to discover that one of them was lying. And that would mean punishment for them all. Besides, if the Mage chose to use a truth-spell, as

was likely on this occasion, it was best that the lie come from Z' Tan himself, who would be protected by his Talent. S' Lin and Z' Kal were to say, truthfully, that they had assumed that he had gone fishing as he had professed. Z' Tan was to avoid the eye of the Mage, while not actually saying anything, until the Mage forced him to answer him directly. And he was then to blurt out the "truth" - that he had, in fact, gone to the foothills of the I' Rez range to search for ancient artifacts. He had fallen asleep on a warm shadowed rock, and had been awoken an hour before sunset by a curious wailing sound. Frightened, remembering the tales of the I' Rez, he had fled, running most of the way and returning home just before sunset. He had lied, naturally, to his parents, to avoid punishment for having visited a forbidden place. And, as evidence in support of his story, he was to produce a shard of pottery - a rare find and his most treasured possession which, until now, he had kept hidden even from his parents.

A sudden hubbub sent S' Lin running to the door, and then outside. The attention of all the villagers in the central compound was directed towards the road from Stil. On the road the Elders had gathered closer together, as if for mutual protection, and all faced the forest. Just emerging from the forest were four Temple guards preceding a sedan chair carried by four bearers. Four more Temple guards brought up the rear. The procession came slowly nearer, as the Elders formed a semicircle in the direction of the approaching Mage and his retinue. As it drew nearer, the Mage could be seen inside the sedan chair, the curtains having been drawn in the cool of the evening. An austere figure with a mane of white hair, sitting very upright, clad in the deep blue of the Temple upper echelon. His hood, thrown back, was edged with purple, and the front of the simple robe adorned with two vertical rows of symbols, embroidered in coloured silks, each symbol a different colour. Between the two rows of patterns was a large orange disk in the centre of which was a smaller blue disk - Mother and Warrior, the emblems of the M' Rekh Temple.

The semi-circle of Elders broke to either side of the path which led to the village from the road, allowing the procession to pass through, re-forming behind and following the sedan chair into the compound. They continued until the leading guards reached the obelisk, and the party then stopped. The sedan chair was lowered by the grateful bearers, sweating from their exertions in spite of their limited apparel, which consisted of nothing more than a brief

length of cloth passed between their legs and then wound around the waist. The four guards from the rear came forward to the sedan chair, and the two in front assisted Examiner Magus D' RanigaElsar na Solteen out of the vehicle. Solteen drew himself up to his full height, a hand-span taller than the tallest present, and took a moment to adjust his dark blue robe, drawing his skirts through the knotted orange and blue cord around his waist, smoothing the creases. Then, followed and preceded by four guards, he walked to the base of the obelisk and turned around to face the Elders, flanked on either side by his guards.

He stood there a moment, a thin, erect dark shape in the shadow of the obelisk, his hair wafting gently in the cool breeze and collecting reflected orange highlights, sweeping the scene with only his eyes. He made an almost imperceptible gesture, the merest flick of his right hand, and the guards on the extreme right and left moved forward two paces, moving inwards towards the Examiner at the same time.

' Hear thiZant!' the guard on the left began his ofpractised litany ' His Eminence, D' RanigaElsar na Solteen, High Mage of the Temple, Examiner of Talents, orders you to assemble here all of this village, from the eldest Elder to the newest babe in arms, none excluded, save by death since the census of yesterday. Assemble and be examined, forthwith.'

Twenty nine adult villagers fell in behind the curved line of eleven Elders facing the Mage, three paces behind, their children a pace ahead of them, save four who were in the arms of their parents, three babes and one child of six or thereabouts who was ill with a fever. The adults shuffled sideways, forming gaps between family groups. Those without children, ten altogether, had assembled at the extremities of the line.

'Z' GoI¶' Rin a couple at the left took a pace backwards.Z' FangZ' Teen' their children stepped back one pace. 'Z' Tena\$' Ren.Z' Kal\$' Lin.Z' Tan...' the roll call from the census list continued until all those behind the row of Elders had been marked present. Then the names of the Elders were read, oldest first, one at a time, and each bowed in acknowledgement but kept his or her position.

The Mage spoke. ' The penalty for concealing a Talent is well known - death. If there are those among you to whom this was not known, this will be the only opportunity you will be

given to reveal the Talent as required by the Law. Speak now.' He paused for several seconds, his grey eyes again sweeping the rows of villagers. ' So be it. We seek a boy of ten to thirteen summers, who has stolen from vendors in the market. There have been many reports of him.' Again silence, and the slow movement of the grey eyes, right to left, then left to right, back to centre, focused on none and all. No mention of the miscreant's Talent - to admit even the possibility of immunity from spells would give hope, weaken the omnipotence of the Temple. Better a mere accounting for theft, the boy would be taken to the Temple and never be seen again. None would question.

' So be it.' The Mage advanced at a slow pace from the obelisk, passed between the two guards at the forefront of the Temple group, who fell in behind him, and turning left, walked past the Elders to the villagers at the end of the line. Then turning around, he walked slowly between the villagers and their Elders who remained facing the obelisk. He looked directly into the eyes of each adult as he passed, saw fear in each pair, brown, grey, blue and amber. But no guilt. When he reached the first family with children - a tot of two in her mother's arms and a boy of four standing in front, one foot nervously rubbing the other, fingers picking at a button on his shirt- he stopped, and turned to face them. An expression of panic passed across the mother's face, her mouth opened as if to speak, and shut abruptly, lower lip between small even teeth. His attention, however, was on the boy, Z' Vand. The boy, head bowed, stopped his fidgetting, hands lowering slowly till they were clasped in front of him. Solteen took the boy's chin in his right hand, raising it till the lad's eyes met his own. A long moment passed, the boy immobile, hypnotised. The Mage removed his hand, turned, and continued down the line, leaving behind him a quaking child and a pair of none-too-steady parents. He passed the next four families with no more than a penetrating stare, then stopped before Z' Kin, a boy of ten. Turning, he spoke to the parents, almost conversationally. ' Where was the lad yesterday?'

' With us. All day.' It was the mother who answered, convulsively. ' I swear.'

' On his tenth-day? At his age?' the grey eyes locked onto the amber, holding the woman's frightened gaze.

' My husband has been ill. He had ague. My son was needed to take his place in the field.

The poppy buyers are due soon and we have lost a week in the harvesting. We promised him a gift from M' Rekh, as a reward, when we sell the harvest. I swear it, my lord.' She spoke in gasping, staccato sentences. ' He is a good boy, a normal boy.' she finished lamely, hands clasped together, held close to her breast.

Solteen turned his attention to the boy, lifted his chin and looked into the dilated amber eyes, then with a perfunctory glance at the father who was shivering uncontrollably, the remnants of the ague or more possibly fear, passed on to the next family. He ignored the two young girls, and moved on, stopping in front of Z' Tan.

Z' Tan, arms dangling limply by his side, studiously examined his bare feet. Solteen turned his glance to Z' Kal and S' Lin who both appeared to be examining the boy' s unkempt hair. A small tic creased the skin at S' Lin' s jaw, Kal' s face was expressionless. The slim hand reached out again, long tapering fingers closed around the boy' s chin, tilting the head towards the inexorable grey orbs. Warm, brown, chocolate-button eyes met cool implacable grey. With eyes still locked on the boy' s Solteen asked of the parents ' Where was he yesterday?'

' Fishing' both Kal and S' Lin replied instantly, unable to avoid looking at each other at the same time.

' And what did you catch, lad?' asked Solteen, in a quiet, not unfriendly tone.

' Nothing. I fell asleep' there was a faint tremor in Tan' s voice. Then ' I always fall asleep.' Silence. *There is fear here. But not terror. Also guilt. And a barrier.* ' Do you know the penalty for lying to the Temple lad?' Without waiting for a reply Solteen continued ' For a lad your age, a whipping spell, far more painful than a whipping administered by a mere mortal. I will allow your lie to pass unpunished if you now tell me the truth. Where were you yesterday?' He repeated the question, his tone edged with menace, friendliness gone.

Z' Tan shifted uncomfortably. He had expected a truth spell, not a psychological inquisition. He could turn the whipping spell. He could lie. He would lie. ' Fishingsir' more boldly ' I always go fishing on my tenth day.'

' And always fall asleep, no doubt?' the grey eyes continued boring into brown.

' Yes, sir.'

The fear has gone. The guilt too. Truth? No! He feels safe in his lie. Why? He must know

that I can impose a truth spell on his tongue. ' Have you heard of truth spells, lad? None can lie when under a truth spell.'

' Yes, sir.'

Still no fear. He does not fear a truth spell. ' What is your name, lad?'

'Z' Tan, sir.*Why does he wish to know my name?*

Solteen straightened from the bowed position he had adopted in his interrogation of Z' Tan, allowed the boy's head to resume its downward incline, turned and continued down the line of villagers. He stopped twice more, asked a few questions accompanied by the eye-to-eye challenge, but did not interrogate any other child. Reaching the end of the line he returned to his original position beneath the obelisk. Once more he scanned the inhabitants of Zant, left to right, right to left, then gaze bent downwards, paused in thought.

Easier than I thought. We won't even need to leave the village, as long as I give up stealing from the market. No truth spell either. These Mages aren't as sharp as they're supposed to be! Why is everyone so frightened of them? All it takes is a cool head, and a bit of guile.

'Z'Tan!'

Z' Tan' s self-congratulatory reverie was abruptly shattered by Solteen' s command. For command it was, no casual mention of the boy' s name. His head jerked upwards, turning towards the obelisk, and, once more, grey eyes locked with brown. Even at this distance the power of the gaze was evident. Not inquisitorial, this time....commanding!

' Come here!'

Without conscious volition Z' Tan's feet began moving him in the direction of the Mage - directly, line of sight, through the front line of Elders, pushing through them without so much as a by-your-leave or apology, drawn towards those commanding eyes as a fish is drawn in on a line, struggling against the pull but unable to resist. Behind him, he heard his mother' s gasp, half sob. The spell nearly broke, but the eyes won, and he was dragged inexorably towards the Mage. This was no mere vendor' s ward, no spell-seller' s curse. This was power, real power, way beyond his first-hand experience. Frightened, now, terrified, he resisted, and his Talent responded. The barriers started lifting into position. The Mage' s eyes changed, his expression showed surprise, and in a flash of insight Z' tan fought his Talent.*No!* To resist

successfully will condemn me to flaying. This is what he is here to find. His Talent subsided, responding to the greater danger, and Z' Tan knew real terror for the first time.

Terror! That resistance was born of terror! Now we shall see what he is hiding. Solteen drew the boy closer till he was a few paces away, between the two guards. ' Now for the truth, Z' Tan. You cannot lie. *Where were you yesterday?*'

Z' Tan felt an overwhelming compulsion to tell all, everything, holding back nothing, not even his parents' complicity in creating the alibi. At the thought of his parents, and their probable fate in the Temple forecourt, his Talent rebelled again, but more subtly this time. A counter-compulsion forced his hand into the pocket on his thigh, his hand coming out with the I' Rez shard, mutely offering it to Solteen. Distracted by the action, Solteen missed the veil around his truth spell, his eyes drawn instantly to the black and gold fragment of ceramic in the boy' s hand. He stepped forward, long hand reaching out, and took the triangular fragment of a bygone era offered him. Triangular, but with one curved side, part of a shallow bowl or plate, blue, almost black, with a high sheen, two concentric rows of red-gold symbols running just below the curve. About half an hand-span from centre to rim.

He stood there examining the fragment, dredging his memory in an attempt to decipher the runes, the boy temporarily forgotten. This was a find indeed! Part of an I' Rez offering plate, in perfect condition, complete with spell inscription. Another thimble-full of arcane knowledge to add to the all-too-empty pot. ' The' Rez ruins! Is that where you were, boy?' not bothering to re-impose the truth spell or eye contact, confident of the control imposed by the earlier terror.

Z' Tan' s voice was barely audible.

' Speak up, boy. Were you at the I' Rez ruins?'

' Not the ruins, sir. The foothills only. I..I have never been near any ruins, nor know where they are.' Z' Tan' s voice came more clearly, overlaid with a tremble.

' Why did you lie, boy? To a Mage of the Temple. Did you wish to keep this forbidden artifact to yourself?'

' N.No, sir. I..I was afraid' came Z' Tan' s halting reply.

' Afraid? What of?' Solteen tore his eyes away from the shard, and looked at the boy,

curiously, but without command.

' My parents, sir. I have been forbidden to go neathe I' Rez range.Z' Tan' s tone was steadier, but the fear within him still very evident.

' So! You fear your parents more than a Temple Mage, boy? This must be corrected. Respect to the Temple takes precedence over all. Your parents can but beat you, and even the severest thrashing is bearable after only a day or two. The Temple can take your life, painfully, as a visit to the Temple forecourt at the next eclipse will prove. I promised you a whipping spell if you lied to me. And so it shall be, for I do not make promises lightly. But, since you have presented the Temple with this artifact, I will show mercy, and will reduce the severity of the whipping. Even so, you will never dare to lie to the Temple again - nor will any of you' lifting his gaze to include all oZant.

The power returned to his eyes, as his look transfixed Z' Tan again.

The shriek which split the russet dusk came from the soul, a soul already suffering the torments of Hell. It did not seem conceivable that so small a frame could create such a sound. Z' Tan screamed again, now on his knees, small body bowed with his head touching, battering, the hard packed earth. His entire body felt as if it were being flayed with a quill-studded rope. Before his eyes huge weals appeared, on his arms, his legs, his chest. He shrieked again, and again, and again, fighting down his Talent at the same time, keeping his parents focused in his mind' s eye.

Z' Kal anS' Lin had flown towards him at the first scream, mindless of invoking the wrath of the Mage, and a similar punishment, for breaking ranks before his departure. They hovered on either side of the boy, S' Lin kneeling, afraid to cause him even greater pain by attempting to hold him, helplessly watching their son in agony. Z' Kal' s face was set, and he studiously avoided so much as a glance at the Mage, knowing that he would hurl himself at Solteen for this blasphemous abuse of power - and would certainly die for his pains.

Solteen, inured against the agonies of miscreants by years of experience of inflicting punishment, and confident in his power, raised his hood over his head and headed for the sedan chair, trailing his guard. Seated comfortably, and without a backward glance, he gave the signal to proceed, and the group snaked it' s way back to the road, heading towards

M' Rekh. Within minutes they were approaching the Earl forest, the leading guards now carrying torches to light the way. Seconds later the last torch was swallowed in the darkness of the dense shade trees, and out of sight.

Z' Kal, who had been watching the departure of the Mage, now reached down and, with both arms, lifted Z' Tan. The boy had stopped screaming, and appeared to be unconscious. Without a word, Z' Kal, closely followed by S' Lin, sped towards their home. He kicked the door wide, and carried Z' Tan towards S' Lin's cot. S' Lin had headed directly for the corners of the room, where she lit the lamps with a taper itself lit at the cooking hearth, then joined Z' Kal at the boy's side. He lay, on one side, shuddering occasionally, but not uttering a sound. Finally, his eyes opened.

' The Mage?'

' Gone. In the Earl forest now' said S' Lin.

Z' Tan closed his eyes again, and released control of his Talent. For a while he lay there, as though asleep, then turned onto his back, spreading arms and legs wide. As with S' Lin, but much faster, the weals subsided, the rawness smoothed into whole skin. No one would have believed that he had been red meat only a few minutes before. He lay there still, eyes closed, breathing shallowly, his mind still remembering the torture he had suffered. Gradually, his breathing evened out, became slow and regular, and he passed into sleep.

Z' Kal and S' Lin stayed by his side. S' Lin sitting on the cot, her hand smoothing his hair. A knock sounded at the door, and an Elder, Z' Vaan, entered and waited just inside. Z' Kal turned and beckoned, and Z' Vaan joined the parents at the bedside.

' How is he?' the Elder asked, concern starkly etched in his aged features, ' We have heard nothing from here since you entered. Is he ...?' The question remained unvoiced.

Z' Kal pointed, without reply. Z' Vaan bent over the boy, looking hard, then gently traced a wrinkled hand over the boy's back. He straightened, looking at Z' Kal. ' So, he can resist a Temple Mage too. I am pleased for the boy, but it is not good news for the village. Zant is too close to the town, and many pass through here. It will not be long before he is discovered, and when the Mage returns it will be to take him. We must confer with the others, tonight, and decide what is to be done. In an hour, Z' Kal, in the smithy. Z' Vaan

placed a hand on S' Lin' s shoulder. ' Even if the pain has gone, the torture will have left its mark on his soul. Keep him inside for the next two days.' He squeezed S' Lins' s shoulder, and left, closing the blue door gently behind him.

The suns had set an hour, and the last vestiges of daylight had fled the sky, making way for moonrise. Stars were bright in the sky when there was a knock on the door. Z' Kal answered the door to find Z' Vaan waiting outside.

' We are ready. I Z' Tan awake? And fit to answer questions?'

' He still sleeps ELa. We would not wake him, he has suffered much and needs to sleep' replied Z' Kal.

' No, no. Do not wake the lad. But you and S' Lin must come. I will have Z' Lina come and sit with him in case he wakes and finds you gone. She will be glad to help you in this time. She was very fond of Z' Pan, and was heartbroken when he was taken. Wait till she arrives, then come to the smithy,' Z' Vaan smiled kindly at Z' Kal and left.

Z' Kal shut the door quietly, and turned to S' Lin. ' Whatever the Gathering may want to do, the outcome is clear. We must leave Zant, and soon. It is only a matter of time before Z' Tan is positively identified as the urchin who steals from the traders in M' Rekh, and is unaffected by spells. The people of M' Rekh are biased against Talents, and afraid of them. None appear in M' Rekh itself. It is said that parents who suspect that their child has a Talent do away with the child, in such a way that it appears to be an accident, in order to avoid losing grace with the Temple. It is only rumour, but it does seem strange that M' Rekh has never spawned any Talents. And children seem to have fatal accidents in M' Rekh far more often than those in the villages.'

' Yes.' S' Lin, eyes downcast, replied ' I have known for a long time that it would come to this, and I have prepared for it. It will be sad to leave Zant, my home since I came to you from Stil. But I would gladly live in the wilderness rather than give up Z' Tan to the Temple. And I know you love him as much as I. So, we must go. I have already assembled those things

that we will require. But where are we to go? For a few weeks we can stay at the lake, as we decided, but then where?' S' Lin looked at Z' Kal with the question in her eyes, knowing that he would have no answer.

' I have thought of that. Like you I have known, ever since I learnt of Z' Tan' s Talent, that one day we must leave Zant. For the last few weeks I have spoken to travellers and itinerants who passed through here and listened to their stories, collecting information and testing it for truth against the tales of others. We must leave, not only Zant, but this area that is ruled by M' Rekh. We must go first to G' Stana. The Temple there is not so rigid as M' Rekh. And then go to villages beyond G' Stana where we will be unknown. We will change our names, and Z' Tan will hide his Talent well from now on, nor take any chances that may reveal it. He has learnt his lesson, a hard lesson for one so young.'

S' Lin looked at Z' Kal in astonishment. He had said nothing of this to her, ever. And all this time, many summers, he had been preparing to leave the village of his birth. For his adopted son. Without bitterness. She ran to him and threw her arms around him, burying her face in his chest, hot tears running down her face onto him. Z' Kal returned the embrace, and kissed her gently on the side of her neck. ' Did you think that I would risk our son' s life by staying here? Or that I would send him away on his own? He is my child too, as much as if he had been born of you by me, and I love him as much as you. And he returns our love equally. Where he goes, we go. Except now. Now we must go to the Gathering. They await us, and we must not make them wait too long. They wish to help us, so let us give them the opportunity. Come, S' Lin.' He took her by the shoulders and gently moved her away from him. They looked into each other' s eyes for a few moments, and then S' Lin turned and led the way to the door. As if on cue, there was a knock, and S' Lin opened the door to find S' Lina, a woman of about thirty-five summers, waiting on the doorstep.

' Thank you S' Lina S', Lin smiled at the woman, 'come in. We do not expect this to take much time, but are grateful that you will sit with Z' Tan in case he wakes. There is *ishai* in the urn, please help yourself.'

' Thank you S' Lin S' Lina smiled back ' I will be glad to sit with that rascal of yours. And sorry to see you leave, too. But we all know that you must. I shall miss you, all three, but

particularly the boy and his cheeky grin.' S' Lina stepped past Lin, and made her way into the room, seating herself at the table. ' Go now. The Elders wish to ensure that the story they have, for any who ask, is consistent. Most of the village are there already. Go, and don't worry about Z' Tan.'

S' Lin smiled her thanks at Lina, as did Z' Kal, and the two left for the Gathering. They walked towards the obelisk at the centre of the village and then bore left. Passing the houses of the other villagers, they arrived at the outskirts of the village. Directly ahead of them, about thirty metres away and set well back from the houses, was the village smithy. Smoke still curled from the chimney, and the yellow glow of oil lamps made bright rectangles of the windows, open to let out the heat and allow the cool night air into the smithy. The door was half open too, and Z' Kal and S' Lin followed the path to it. They entered and found that most of their neighbours, as S' Lina had said, were waiting for them, sitting on fresh straw laid down by Z' Rak the smith. Z' Rak himself stood to one side, a slight but muscular man, not the brawny type normally associated with his profession. He nodded at them in greeting, and gestured towards Z' Vaan, who was at the focus of a knot of villagers. On one side of Z' Vaan stood another man, as old as he, and on the other a woman of indeterminate age. The three nodded at Z' Kal and S' Lin, and Z' Vaan extended a hand and indicated a place at the centre of the arc of villagers, inviting them to be seated. Z' Kal and S' Lin did as they were bid, and Z' Vaan and his companion Elders lowered themselves to the ground and sat facing the pair.

' There is no time for formality. Z' Vaan went directly to the matter in hand, ' we all know that Z' Kal, S' Lin, and Z' Tan must leave, though we may all wish that it were otherwise. We are here to help, if we can, and to determine the story that we will give to those who will undoubtedly ask. But first, let Z' Kal tell us his plans, if a plan he has at all. Then we will advise and assist if possible. Z' Kal. We will hear you.'

' Thank you Z' Vaan, for appreciating the urgency of this situation. I do have a plan, vague though it is. That we *must* leave is obvious to all. The question you must all be asking, is where do we go. I have spent all my life in Zant, as you all know, wandering no further than M' Rekh, and that only occasionally. I have no direct experience of the outer world. Nor has S' Lin. But I have been listening to travellers tales for a long while, perhaps with more intent

than mere entertainment, closer than the rest of you. For I have long known, since I discovered that our Z' Tan had a Talent, that sooner or later we would have to leave, for as surely as Mother follows Warrior each day it was inevitable that Z' Tan would be discovered. A Talent cannot be hidden forever. We head, eventually, for G' Stana and the villages beyond. The stories we have heard are encouraging as the Temple of G' Stana is minor to M' Rekh and the priests are not involved in magic to the same degree. They merely collect taxes for M' Rekh and are not as concerned about Talents. We must bide awhile until it is safe to go through M' Rekh for they will be watching for strangers heading towards the caravan route. We will stay a few weeks at the lake, in the lodge by the water, close enough for us to be warned of seekers in the village, and far enough for us to disappear into the forest if danger threatens. Then we will go, separately, to M' Rekh. I will go a day ahead and S' Lin and Z' Tan will follow. That way we will not attract as much attention as we would if travelling as a family. I will be a herder, wishing to see more of the world and working my way with a caravan. S' Lin and Z' Tan will be rejoining her ' family' GinAda on the far side of G' Stana, as the result of the death of her husband. They will choose new names, as will I. Beyond that I have no plan. Your advice and suggestions would be welcome.' Z' Tan paused, and waited expectantly.

' We can help, after all. It did not occur to us that you would venture as far as G' Stana.' Z' Vaan looked directly at Z' Kal. ' We supply a caravan with poppy seed for trading, as you know. The van master, N' Gala, has become a friend over the years, and is violently opposed to the Temple who demand higher taxes from him each year. Also, one of his men was flogged to death three years ago for drunkenly knocking over a priest outside a tavern. The priest, a minor one, was also drunk and insulting. But the Temple can do no wrong, and who would take the word of a van guard over that of a priest? The master was not only angry but wounded too, as the man had been in his service for many years and was close to him. We will contact him and advise him of your predicament. He has no fear of Talents, and will help you escape the Temple, and provide passage for all three of you.' Z' Vaan's expression was one of relief at being able to do something for the family. ' He will also school you in mannerisms and behaviour so that your stories will be believable. We will talk to him when

he returns in another ten-days or so, and bring him to the lake to talk with you.'

' This is better than I had dared to hope. Vaan's relief was also obvious, ' I had no real plan other than getting away from M' Rekh and the Temple. But our absence will be noticed soon, and we must know what story you have prepared to account for it so that, if we are captured, we too can relate the same story and protect the village. What will you tell the seekers?'

' We will keep it as simple as possible. Tan ran away as soon as he recovered sufficiently. In fear of the Temple. He was seen heading for the I' Rez range, across the river. You followed, telling S' Lin to meet you at the lake and to bring provisions for a few days so that when you returned with Tan you could stay with him at the lake until his confidence was restored sufficiently to come home to Zant. But none of you returned and we had no knowledge of where you went. We did not know you were at the lake until a few days before the seekers arrived, when one of us - Z' Tim, he is the one who fishes most - found you there while fishing, and you related the story. And Tan was not with you when you were encountered at the lake. We did not return after that, to leave Tan in peace with his family, and did not realise that you had left the lake.' Vaan looked around for comment, but all present seemed to agree with the simplicity of the story.

' We will warn you of the Temple seekers' said Nina, the Elder beside Vaan. Her voice was remarkably clear and melodious, and though her age was easily determined by the firmness of her body and the long black hair untouched by silver, her eyes, deep-searching and wise, placed her beside Vaan's wisdom. ' We will send one of the children by the side-paths they know so well and use when they do not wish to be found. The presence of a child will not be suspicious. Then you must hide in the reeds where they are thickest, taking care not to leave a trail to the water. And carry some food at all times - you may spend some time by the water's edge before the seekers tire of waiting and return to M' Rekh. You will also need some coin. Do you have any, Z' Kal?'

'S' Lin answered before Kal could voice his reply. ' Some, yes, Nina. I have put some away regularly in anticipation of this eventuality. Enough to feed us for a few ten-days.'

' You too? I have been doing the same. Kal looked at S' Lin with laughter in his eyes and

his voice, ' It seems we do not know each other as well as we believed. And I, too, have enough for a few ten-days.'

There was a gentle ripple of laughter around the smithy, and husbands looked at wives with a curious glint in their eyes, and wives returned the glances with similar expressions of curiosity. The mood of the Gathering lightened perceptibly, and the tension dissipated. There was still sadness in all faces, but relief too at the solution of their problems.

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