

Trickster's Queen

Tamara Pierce

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TRICKSTER'S QUEEN



TAMORA PIERCE

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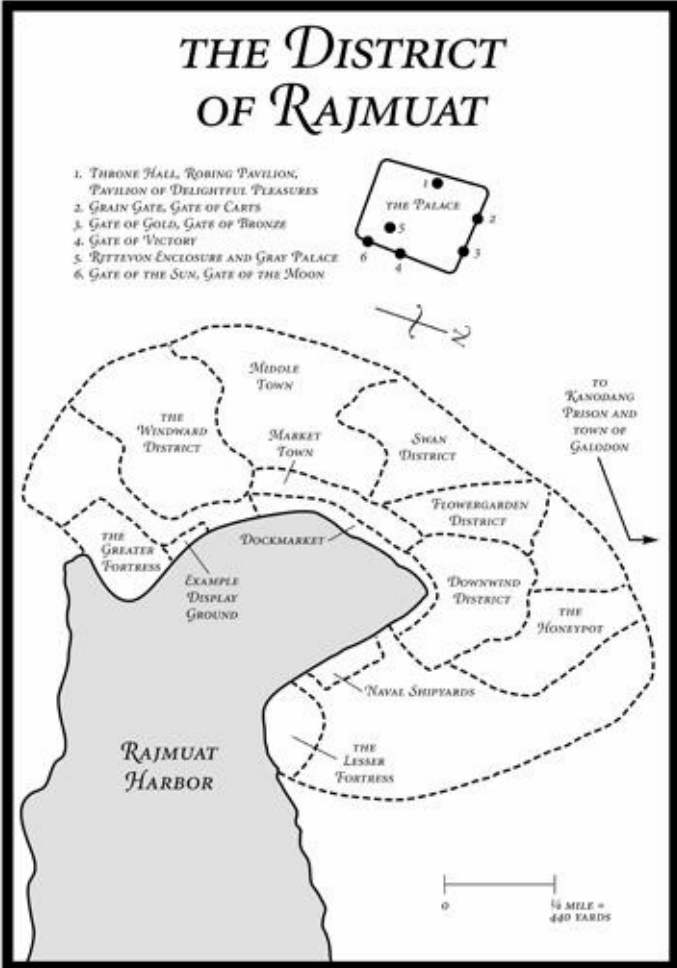
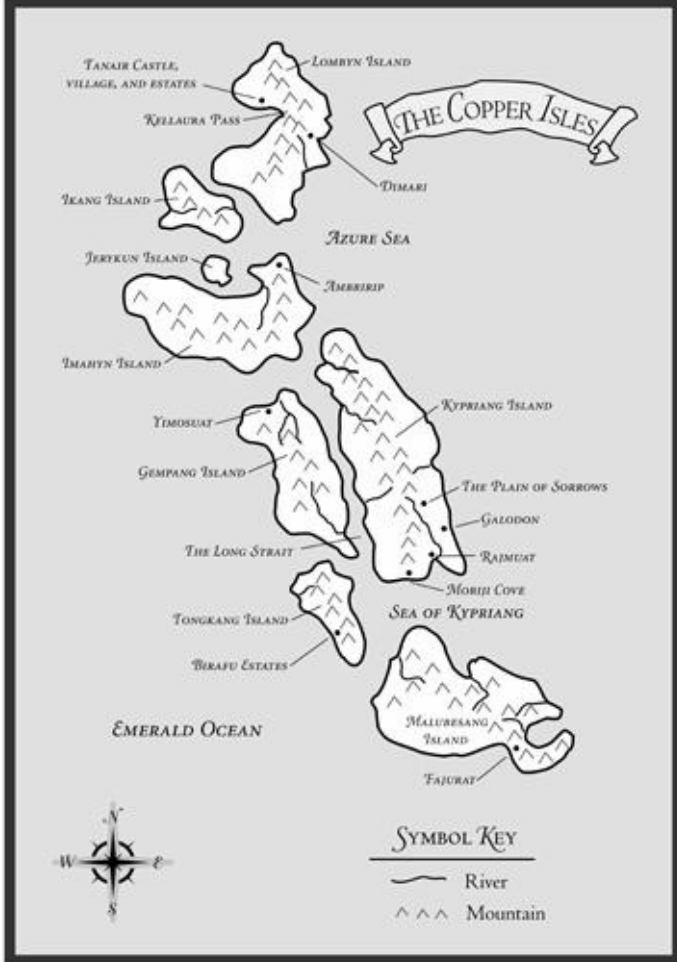
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*To Bruce Coville, divinely tricky, magically inspiring—
one of the best men I've ever known,
and
To Mary Lou Pierce,
the best Ma in the world*



In a time of fear, the One Who I Promised will come to the raka, bearing glory in her train and justice in her hand. She will restore the god to his proper temple and her children to her right hand. She will be twice royal, wise and beloved, a living emblem of truth to her people. She will be attended by a wise one, the cunning one, the strong one, the warrior, and the crows. She will give a home to all, and the kudarung will fly in her honor.

*—From the Kyprish Prophecies
written in the year 2000*





PROLOGUE

THE COPPER ISLES

In the winter of 462–463 H.E., the brown-skinned raka people and their many allies, part-bloods and white-skinned luarin, prepared for revolution against the luarin ruling house, the Rittevons. The rebel plan was to replace the Rittevons with one who had the bloodlines of both the raka queens and the luarin rulers, a passionate girl named Saraiyu Balitang.

The leaders of the raka rebel conspiracy did not spend the winter months dozing. Throughout the Isles, Crown tax collectors vanished from their beds, never to be seen again. Even more baffling, all the suspects who were questioned in their disappearances swore under truthspell that they had last seen the missing officials alive and well. Property damage on luarin estates that winter far exceeded that expected from heavy rains. Dams collapsed, sweeping away acres of rice fields. Blackrot invaded grain silos, destroying winter stores. Bridges fell. Overseers and a few nobles were murdered. When the Crown sent soldiers to kill the people of the nearest raka village, as the law required, the troops found that the inhabitants had vanished. Many people reported hearing war gongs sounding from deep within the lowland jungles.

Life for the Balitang family in the highlands of Lombyn Isle had two sides. One was that of a family that had just lost its patriarch and had to get through the winter months before they could return to the capital city of Rajmuat at the behest of the ruling family. Duchess Winnamine Balitang took solace from her two older stepdaughters, Saraiyu and Dovasary, and her own children, six-year-old Petran and five-year-old Elsren. She conducted lessons, had snowball fights, told stories, and did her best to keep everyone from screaming with boredom. She also helped train Sarai's maid, a twenty-three-year-old raka woman named Boulaj, and Dove's maid, the former slave Aly Homewood from the kingdom of Tortall.

Beneath this comfortable domestic life lay a second, less visible and more directed. Many of the leaders of the hoped-for revolution were servants to the Balitangs. They guarded the two older girls and perfected their plans. They sent and received information through a network of mages called the Chain, who used their powers to pass messages from island to island. The members of the household practiced fighting arts, from unarmed combat to sword and spear work, in the outbuildings at Tana Castle. They had an unusual teacher for new ways of fighting: Nawat, a young man who had once been a crow. The duchess saw this practice as much-needed exercise, and both she and her daughters joined in. To the raka's regret, Sarai refused to continue her lessons in swordcraft after she fought and beheaded her would-be lover, Prince Bronau, the night he slew her father.

Busiest of all the members of the rebel conspiracy was the newest to join, seventeen-year-old Aly Homewood. She was in reality Alianne of Pirate's Swoop, the daughter and granddaughter of Tortall spymasters, raised from the cradle to compete in the world of international espionage. During the previous summer she had acted as chief bodyguard to the Balitang children. With the arrival of spring and the move to Rajmuat, Aly knew she would become the rebellion's spymaster. Although the Balitangs' former housekeeper, Quedanga, has remained in Rajmuat to collect information from long-standing networks of spies, Aly's specially recruited spies and those they will train have their own

unique work ahead. They will collect information for the rebel leaders to use against their enemies and conduct whatever actions of sabotage and psychological operations required to put the raka enemies at odds with each other. For sixteen years she studied such work under her father's eye. Now she would do it herself, for the promise of better leadership for the Isles.

In preparation, Aly used the winter to build a cadre of trained spies, people among the household who could learn and use all she had to teach. The lessons of these raka and part-raka in their twenties and thirties included written and spoken codes and code breaking, lock picking, and climbing. She also taught them sign language, thorough searches, medicines and herbs, and the detection of other spies. Because she was younger than many of her trainees, Aly treated them in a teasing, grandmotherly way while they awarded her the raka nickname of *Duani* or “boss lady.” Aly also spent time with the raka mage Ochobu, creating suicide spells and magic detection charms, and with the rebels' armorers choosing weapons for her pack and for herself.

Aly dared not tell anyone why she was so eager to take up the mantle of spymaster. To do so, she would have to reveal her true parentage. The raka would see her as a tool of the Tortallan Crown while the forces loyal to the Rittevon king and his regents would see her as a spy. Only one being knew her true history: the deposed god of the Copper Isles, the trickster Kyprioth. It was he who had brought Aly to the service of the rebellion that would return him to his seat of power. Although responsible for her presence, Kyprioth did not speak to Aly throughout the long winter. She assumed he was hiding from the god brother and goddess sister who had cast him from his Isles: Mithros and the Great Mother Goddess.

Luckily, Aly had the crow fighter Nawat to entertain and delight her through the long months. Her courtship grew more passionate throughout the winter, and he finally stopped offering her bugs to eat.

At the beginning of April, most of the household traveled south to ready the family's home in the capital, Rajmuat. The family and the remainder of the servants, including Aly, took the following few weeks to prepare for the move that would change all of their lives completely and irrevocably.



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RAJMUAT

April 23, 463 H.E.

Rajmuat harbor, Copper Isles

As the ship *Gwenna* glided through the entrance of Rajmuat harbor, a young woman of seventeen years leaned against the bow rail, taking in her surroundings through green-hazel eyes. Despite her white skin, she was dressed like a native raka in sarong, sash, and wrapped jacket. The sarong displayed her neat, if thin, figure—one with the curves that drew male eyes. The calf-length garment also showed muscled legs and trim ankles protected by leather slippers. Her jacket, worn against the chill of the spring air, covered her muscular upper arms, while the loose areas of her clothes hid a assortment of flat knives designed for her needs. She had a small, delicate nose, inherited from her mother, just as her eyes were her father's. The wide mouth, its lower lip fuller than the upper, was also hers, with smiles tucked into the corners. Her reddish gold hair was cut just below her earlobes to frame her head like a helmet.

Aly looked the soul of repose as she lounged against the rail, but her eyes were busy. She swiftly took in the panorama of Rajmuat as the city came into view. It sprawled over half of the C-shaped harbor, arranged on the rising banks like offerings laid on green steps. Steam rose from the greeneries as the early-morning sun heated damp jungle earth. Patches of white and rose pink stucco marked the newer houses, while the older houses, built of wood and stone, sported roofs that were sharply peaked and sloping, like the wings of some strange sitting bird. The higher the ground, the more complex the roof, with lesser roofs sprouting beneath the main one. The roofs of the wealthier houses blazed with gilt paint in the sun. Strewn among the homes were the domed, gilded towers of Rajmuat's temples.

Above them all stood the main palace of the Kyprin rulers. Its walls, twenty feet thick, patrolled by alert guardsmen day and night, gleamed like alabaster. The rulers of the Isles were not well liked. They required the protection of strong walls.

In the air over the great harbor, winged creatures wheeled and soared, light glancing off their metallic feathered wings. Aly shaded her eyes to look at them. These were Stormwings, harbingers of war and slaughter, creatures with steel feathers and claws whose torsos and heads were made of flesh. They lived on human pain and fear. In the Copper Isles, ruled by the heavy-handed Rittevons and the Luarin nobles, the Stormwings were assured of daily meals. Aly hummed to herself. There had been plenty of Stormwings when she and the Balitangs had sailed north a year before. Now there were great many more. From the news she had gathered on their voyage to Rajmuat, she wasn't surprised. The regents, Prince Rubinyan and Princess Imajane, had spent the winter rains executing anyone who might give them trouble, in the name of their four-year-old king. Aly nodded in silent approval. It was so useful when the people in charge helped her plans along.

The Stormwings reminded her that she was not on deck to sightsee. Aly turned her head to the left. Here a fortress guarded the southern side of the harbor entrance. Beyond it, on a short stone pier, stood the posts called Examples. Each harbor had them, public display areas where those who had vexed the

government were executed and left on display. In Rajmuat, the capital of the Isles, the Examples were reserved for the nobility. They were surrounded on land by a stone wall broken by a single gate. Over the gate, a banner flapped on the dawn breeze, a rearing bat-winged horse of metallic copper clothed in red, posed on a white field with a copper border—the flag of the Rittevon kings of the Copper Isles.

Guards streamed through the gate and onto the pier. At the foot of one of the posts men were arguing, waving their arms and pointing. They wore the red-painted armor of the King's Watch, the force charged with keeping the peace, enforcing the law, and conducting executions. Aly narrowed her eyes to sharpen her magical Sight. The power was her heritage from both parents, and allowed her to read the lips of the men and take note of their insignia. She identified four lieutenants, one captain, and a number of men-at-arms who did their best to pretend they were invisible.

Someone sniffed behind her. "Carrion crows," Lady Sarai Balitang remarked scornfully. "What are they fighting over who gets the 'honor' of displaying the next wretch? Or just over who does the mopping?" Sarai moved up to stand beside Aly at the rail, her brown eyes blazing with dislike as she watched the men. A year older and an inch taller than Aly, Sarai had creamy gold skin and tumbles of braided and curled black hair under a sheer black veil. An excellent horsewoman, she held herself proudly straight, catching the eye of anyone who saw her.

"They seem to be missing something." Thirteen-year-old Dovasary Balitang moved in to stand on Aly's free side, and pointed. Where the Example pier joined the mainland stood a large wooden sign painted stark white. On that sign were three names and the words *Executed for treason against the Crown, decreed by His Highness Prince Rubinyan Jimajen and Her Highness Princess Imajane Rittevon Jimajen, in the name of His Gracious Majesty King Dunevon Rittevon*. The date was that of the previous day.

"What happened to their poor bodies?" whispered Sarai, brown eyes wide. "They should be here for weeks."

"Perhaps Stormwings dropped down and carried them off," Dove suggested quietly. Aly's mistress was different from her beautiful older sister, shorter and small-boned. She had the self-contained air of someone much older. She had a catlike face and observant black eyes. Like Sarai, her skin was creamy gold, her hair black, and her lips full. She also wore a black gown and veil in mourning for the father who had been killed six months before.

Aly knew exactly what had happened to the dead, because she had created a plan for anyone executed and displayed here. The absence of dead Examples was her declaration, as the rebellion's spymaster, that she would turn the Rittevon Crown and its supporters inside out. The spies she had sent ahead with Ulasim three weeks before the family's departure had been charged with putting her declaration into action.

Body thieves were expected to attack from the land. No one would expect people to swim to the pier in the foul harbor water. Her people had done just that, to remove the bodies, weigh them down with chains, and sink them in the harbor. The plan worked on many levels. The Crown officials lost the Examples they had made, and the Kings' Watch was left with a mystery. Aly knew quite well that the mysteries frightened people, particularly those people who were not supposed to allow them to happen. Sooner or later word of the vanishing Examples would leak out. People would start to see that the Crown was not as powerful as it claimed to be.

"Last autumn Prince Rubinyan told Winna that there would be no more unnecessary executions," Sarai commented.

"Maybe he thinks these *are* necessary," said Dove, grim-faced. "Or Imajane does."

"Hunod Ibadun? Dravinna?" The soft voice spoke the names painted on the announcement board. The voice belonged to Sarai and Dove's stepmother, Duchess Winnamine Balitang. The girls made space for her at the rail. "They wouldn't harm a fly if it were biting them." She was a tall, slender

woman, elegant in deep black mourning. "Hunod is—was—Prince Rubinyan's friend!"

"I would guess they are not friends now," remarked Dove, her voice steady.

"Winna, I don't recognize the names," Sarai told her stepmother. "They aren't the same Ibaduns who own those rice plantations on the southern coast of Lombyn, are they?"

"No," replied the duchess, wiping her eyes. "Hunod and Dravinna were cousins to those Ibaduns. They have—had—their own estates on Gempang. They grew *orchids*. Has that become treasonous?"

"It depends on what they grew along with them, I suppose," Dove said, squeezing her stepmother's free hand. "Or what *Topabaw* thought they were growing."

Aly twiddled her thumbs, as she often did when thinking. She was not supposed to protect the family this year. She was here to gather information and, through exquisite planning, destroy the people's belief in the Rittevon Crown and promote the longing for a young, sane, raka queen. Aly looked forward to crossing swords with the Crown's official spymaster, who'd held that post for thirty bloody years. She knew Prince Rubinyan had personal spies, because she had caught some of them the year before, but the master of the crown's spies, Duke Lohearn Mantawu, called Topabaw by all, was the man who bred fear. The downfall of Topabaw was to be one of her special projects now that she was back in the capital.

She was envisioning her plans for him when she heard a change in the Stormwings' shriek overhead, from normal taunts to rage. Seagulls fled the harbor in silence, and the city's myriad parrots stopped their raucous morning conversations. The clatter of shipping and the shouts of sailors rang overloud in the air. Aly waited, listening. Goose bumps prickled their way up her arms. Gradually she heard it more clearly, a rough sound, harsh and bawling.

She straightened with a grin. "Crows," she announced.

The crows burst into the air above the heights west of the harbor in a squalling, quarreling, soaring ebony cloud. They turned the sky above Rajmuat's palace black as activity around the harbor came to a halt. The Stormwings grabbed for height with their immense steel-feathered wings, snarling with outrage at the invaders. They darted at the crows, bladed wings sweeping out to hack them to pieces. The crows, smaller and nimbler, scattered. Wheeling, they dropped, then flew up among the Stormwings to peck at the exposed tender human flesh of their enemies. The racket was indescribable.

I wonder how many of these people know that the crows are sacred to Kyprioth the Trickster? Aly wondered. The raka full-bloods know, but how many part-bloods, and how many full-blood luarin? Are they going to take this as an omen? I hope not. We really *don't* need omens soaring all over the city.

Aly sighed. "I had so wished that our return would be *quiet*," she said wistfully.

"I don't believe the crows care, Aly," Dove replied.

Sarai added, "I like anything that gives those disgusting Stormwings a hard time."

The duchess took a deep breath. "Come, ladies. We'll be landing soon. Let's make sure we've packed everything." She led her stepdaughters below.

Aly stayed where she was, her eyes on the city. Things would start to move fast now. All the way here, she had picked up stories of the unrest in the Isles that had begun over the winter and still continued. Soon actual fighting would begin. The fighting, at least, was not her concern, but that of the rebel leaders who served Balitang House. Her biggest task was to make sure they had the most current information available. For this she had access to the network of informants built up by the raka, a network that drew from every skin color and every social category. She also had her own pack, the spies she herself had trained intensively over the winter. They had come south with Ulasim three weeks earlier to start training their allies in Rajmuat. They and their own recruits would gather still more information for her. Most importantly, Aly would collect information from inside the palace, to give the raka as much news of possible allies and the regents' movements as she could. Aly would the

bring all the information together, study it, find connections, and get the boiled-down intelligence to the people who needed it.

She thought the odds of the rebellion's success were good. She respected the raka leaders in the household. Coming south, she had glimpsed how far their reach extended, and was pleased. They had a strong, beloved candidate for the throne in Sarai. Her attractiveness and charm would win the hearts of the more reluctant citizens of the Isles. A child sat on the Rittevon throne, governed by heavy-handed regents who were despised by many. And the rebels had been whittling away at the luarin confidence all winter. Only this morning they had dealt the King's Watch a hard slap with the disappearances of the Crown's Examples. Aly even had a god on her side, if he would ever show up.

Aly's nerves buzzed. As if he had read her mind, Kyprioth the Trickster appeared at her side. It was Kyprioth who had brought Aly to the Isles, though he was not the reason that she had stayed. Three hundred years earlier his brother, the sun and war god Mithros, and his sister, the moon and fertility Great Mother Goddess, had accompanied the luarin to the Isles and ousted Kyprioth from his throne. Now the Trickster hoped to retake what was his.

"Hello, you rascal," Aly greeted him cheerfully. "Why didn't you ask the crows to behave?"

"If I cared to clack my teeth in a supremely useless exercise, I *would* have tried to tell them to behave," retorted the god lightly, his black eyes dancing with mischief. "You'll find that not all of your allies are under your control, my dear."

The god was lean and muscled, straight-backed like a dancer. For reasons best known to him, he wore a salt-and-pepper beard and hair, both cropped short. He'd once told Aly he thought this style gave him the look of an elder statesman. Today his coat was a bright mass of yellow, pink, lavender, and pale blue squares. He jingled with a multitude of charms and bits of jewelry. His sarong, skirtlike garment that men kilted up between their legs, was patterned in black and white diagonal stripes. He wore leather sandals studded with copper, as well as toe and finger rings made of copper and gems. For once he wore no copper earring, only a single blue drop.

Aly made a face at him. "Where were you all winter? You left me to yearn. I yearned for months but you never so much as sent a messenger pigeon." She kept her voice quiet but teasing. The sailor looked too busy to notice her and her companion, even if they could see the god, but she liked to be careful in all she did.

Kyprioth beamed at her. "I was someplace warmer than the highlands of Lombyn," he replied. "Don't complain to me. You were having all kinds of fun, training your little spies. All *I* could do was wait. I did so in a place where I had plenty to amuse me." His gaze was fixed on the city. A will of stone showed as the corners of his mouth tightened. "I've waited a long time for this spring to come."

Aly stayed where she was, though her body wanted to flee. It unnerved her to see that depth of emotion in the dethroned god. "Well, you don't need *me*, then," she joked weakly. "I'll just take the next ship for Corus, get home in time for my mother's birthday."

Kyprioth turned to look at her. "You're just as eager to see this through as any of my raka. Don't even pretend that you aren't. Which reminds me." He reached out and pressed the ball of his thumb against the middle of Aly's forehead. Gold fire swamped her mind, making her sway.

She braced herself against the rail and waited for her normal vision to return. She dug into the folds of her sarong for the bit of mirror she kept there for emergencies. Her forehead looked much as normally did, pale after the winter and chapped by the sea air and wind. She grimaced and reminded herself to filch Sarai's facial balm, then put the mirror away.

"What was that?" she asked him. "I thought you'd at least leave a beauty mark or something."

"I would not touch your beauty, my dear," said the god with his flashing smile. "And I would be bereft if you chose to commit suicide rather than be tortured or questioned under truthspell. No one will be able to force knowledge from your lips or your hands."

Aly raised an eyebrow at him. "Oh. So they can torture me, they just can't make me tell the truth. An enchanting prospect, sir."

His smile broadened to a grin. "I love it when you call me sir. It makes me feel all . . ." He hesitated, then found the words he wanted. "All godlike. So there's no need to commit suicide. You won't ever surrender what you know."

"Have you granted the others this splendid favor?" she asked, curious. "I wouldn't want them to be jealous."

Kyprioth leaned against the rail, his expression wry. "No one else in the rebellion has put together as much of the complete picture as you have done over this winter, gathering bits and pieces. You simply had to ferret it all out, didn't you? Ulasim can give perhaps a hundred names. Ochobu can give the names of the Chain and the main conspirators among the Balitang servants. If my other leaders die, they can be replaced."

Aly showed him no sign of the chill that crawled down her spine over that matter-of-fact "they can be replaced." He's a god, she told herself. It's different for them.

Kyprioth sighed. "But you, my dear, have learned nearly the entire thing—not the foot soldiers, but those in command and where they are, the members of the Chain. . . . You couldn't help it. It's your nature to poke and pry and gather. Even your fellow rebels are ignorant of the extent of your knowledge, which makes me chuckle."

Aly fanned her hand at him, like a beauty who brushed off a compliment.

"Besides, I've grown attached to you," Kyprioth said, capturing her hand. He kissed the back of her fingers and released her. "I would hate it if you used the suicide spell and left me for the Black God realm. You know how brothers are—we hate to share."

"You'll have to let me go to him sometime," Aly reminded the god. "*I'm not immortal.*"

"That is 'sometime.' I am talking about this summer," Kyprioth replied. His eyes darkened. "Make sure you see this through. Once battle is joined in the Divine Realms, we gods draw strength from the success of our worshippers. If you and I fail, the luarin will exterminate the raka. And I will be unable to help them, because my brother and sister will kick me to the outermost edge of the universe." Her face brightened. "But there, why be gloomy? We're going to have a wonderful year, I'm sure of it!"

He was gone.

For a moment Aly hoped the god was not placing more trust in her abilities than she deserved. Then she shrugged. There was one way to find out if she was as good at her task as she and Kyprioth hoped and that was to pull off a war. "What's a little thing like revolution between friends?" she wondered and looked ahead.

Yards of dirty water lay between the moving ship and the dock, where a welcoming party stood. "So we begin," said Fesgao Yibenu as he came to stand with Aly. The raka sergeant-at-arms swept the docks with his narrow eyes. "No royal welcome, despite Elsren's being the heir," he remarked, settling a helmet over his prematurely silver hair. With a wave he ordered the men-at-arms who had sailed with the family to flank the rail where the gangplank would be lowered. "We are definitely the poor country cousins of the royal house." Fesgao was in charge of the household men-at-arms and the rebellion's war leader. He'd spent his life guarding Sarai and Dove, keeping the last descendants of the old raka queens safe. Now he looked at the man who commanded the twenty extra Balitang men-at-arms waiting on the dock, and saluted him. The man saluted in return, a hand signal that meant all was quiet there.

"They've added checkpoints where the docks meet the land, do you see?" Fesgao murmured to Aly. "They want to know who comes and who goes."

Aly shrugged. Soldiers could not possibly watch every inch of ground between the fortresses that flanked the harbor mouths. In the dark, a hundred raka swimmers could enter the water and no one

would know. "If they're watching the docks, they're worried," she murmured. "Let's go and give them more to worry about."

Duchess Winnamine had returned to the deck, leading the two children she had borne Dul Mequen. Petranne, a six-year-old girl with silky black curls and long-lashed eyes, danced in place excited to come home to Rajmuat. Five-year-old Elsren was his father's son, brown-haired and stoic. He hid his face shyly in his mother's skirts.

Winnamine shook her head as she looked at the dock. "This is not good," she murmured, frowning. Ochobu, the old raka who was the household mage and healer, came up beside her. She, too, was a leader in the rebellion, responsible for the mage network known as the Chain. They had been the source of the rebels' information all winter. "What is not good?" Ochobu asked. She had a hand against her forehead to shade her brown eyes as she inspected the people on the dock. "You are a duchess, and a woman of property. You cannot walk into the city like a commoner. You must have a proper escort."

"We *have* a proper escort aboard with us," Winnamine said quietly. "Forty men-at-arms looks as if we consider ourselves important. We aren't important until the regents say we are. And half of those men are new. We can't pay more guards," Winnamine said. "I told Ulasim before he left not to hire anyone!"

"Your Grace," Aly said politely. Winnamine looked at her. "Ulasim always has good reasons for what he does, you know that. See the checkpoints? There's been trouble in the city—they didn't have checkpoints at the docks last year. Maybe Ulasim found a way to pay these men-at-arms. Or maybe they're just rented for the hour, like actors who mourn at funerals. You know, to add to your consequence."

The thought of her consequence made Winnamine chuckle as Sarai and Dove came to join them. Overhead the Stormwings glided, shrieking like gulls.

Once the ship docked and the passengers disembarked, Fesgao and the guards circled the Balitar family and helped them into litters. Servants loaded the family's belongings into a handful of carts. Only when everything was stowed and the litters surrounded by armed men did Fesgao move the party out. The litter bearers set off into the tangle of streets that ended at the dockside.

Colors, sounds, and smells assaulted Aly, making her shrink against the litter that held Sarai and Dove. She had gotten used to the long silences of winter nights at Tanair. Street vendors shouted news of their wares, bellowing their praises of jackfruit, sweet cakes, and cheap copper and silver bracelets. Bird sellers walked among them, carrying poles laden with dozens of species of loud, unhappy winged creatures. Shops displaying goods for passersby lined the streets near the docks. Perfumes and spices filled the air with scents.

The pedestrians came in all races and colors, shrieking at those who got in the way and bargaining at the tops of their lungs. They were dressed in all kinds of styles, from luarin shirts and hose to the robes of Carthakis. Many people lined their eyes in kohl as protection against sun glare and the evil eye. Slaves and deep-jungle raka in sarongs or loincloths sported tattoos on arms, backs, and chests.

Aly took it in as she walked beside the litter that held Sarai and Dove. She had picked out a couple of watchers—people who paid close attention to their group. She also recognized a couple of her own trainee spies from Tanair. She smiled, proud as a mother whose child had taken her first steps, then glanced up to see how Winnamine and the two younger children did in the litter ahead of them. Fesgao walked beside them, talking quietly with the duchess. Rihani, the raka mage who looked after Petranne and Elsren, walked on the other side of the litter, pointing out sights of interest. Slowly they moved into the quieter, wider streets of Market Town, the city's merchant district.

There were signs of trouble in Market Town, shuttered stores with Crown seals on the doors to show they'd been seized by the law, chipped paint and splintered wood showing where people had hurled rocks. Aly saw a charred open spot where, if she remembered correctly, a temple to Ushjur, the god of the east wind, had stood. This was most certainly a slap at the luarin, who came from the east. Aly made a note to ask about it.

She had no sense of armed watchers, but she felt observed. Aly looked up. In the houses above the shops, people filled each window, their eyes fixed on the open-sided litters. Aly bit the corner of her lower lip. Ulasim had gotten the word out that people were not supposed to gather in the street to greet the prophesied queen, but he could not stop them from trying to get a look at her. They were drawing the attention of the spies who followed their procession. She could see them noting the audience. Topaba and prince-regent Rubinyan would have word of this before noon.

"Busy already, Aly?" Fesgao asked. He'd walked back to her. "Your glance darts like dragonflies over the water."

Aly fluttered her lashes at Fesgao. "I never figured you for a poet," she joked.

He smiled. "We can control the common folk only so much," he continued in his softest tones.

"Oh, I know," she replied lightly. "Her Grace was excited to see all these new warriors of ours. Do we rent them, or may we keep them? That tall one with the scar on his chin might actually be able to keep up with me for all of a day."

"You are too gracious," Fesgao replied, face straight. "You would break the poor boy by noon, and we would have to keep him in the infirmary for two weeks." He returned to the duchess at the head of the column.

"It's dangerous," Dove remarked softly from inside the litter. "They shouldn't stare so openly. Someone will notice their interest."

"Perhaps they've never seen disgraced nobility return to Rajmuat before," suggested Aly. "They could just be looking at Elsren. He is Dunevon's heir."

"Not officially," Dove said, meticulous as always about points of law. "The regents have to make Elsren the official heir by decree. They should—it's customary—but they may choose not to, if they think the nobles won't insist. Until then, if people know what's good for them, they won't pay any attention to Elsren at all."

Aly noted more signs of trouble as they entered the wealthier residential neighborhood of Windward: burn marks on stone, and hastily whitewashed stucco. Here no one could watch the street from the windows of their homes, because these were set back behind walls ten feet high. Instead, people lined the street on both sides.

"The regents will hear of this," Dove added quietly. "They won't like it."

Aly patted the younger girl's thin shoulder. "Now, if they got everything they liked, they would be spoiled," she told Dove. "And nobody likes spoiled regents."

"Spoiled regents kill people and leave them at the harbor mouth," Dove said gloomily.

Aly smiled slyly and told her young mistress, "Yes, but they don't seem to be able to keep them there very long."

Dove glanced at Aly sharply, then eyed her sister. Sarai leaned against the side of the litter watching the street. "She thinks the twice-royal queen is a fairy tale, you know," Dove told Aly. "Made up by Mithros and the Goddess to keep the raka quiet under luarin rule. If there is something going on, she will take a lot of convincing."

"If there was anything for her or you to know, you'd have been told, surely," Aly said. As the raka general, Ulasim had ordered that Sarai and Dove not be told of the plans being made on their behalf. "Worry about prophecies another time. Once we've unpacked and had baths, for instance."

Dove sighed. "All right, keep changing the subject," she said as she sank back against the cushion.

“But I'm not fooled. You know something. You're harder to work out than Sarai, but I know you too well by now.”

Aly was about to reply “Don't ask me, I have brothers,” but she caught herself. Over the winter she had nearly told Winnamine, Sarai, and Dove the truth about her own background. Aly wanted to trust them. She would trust them with her life if she had to, as they had trusted her with theirs. But she could not trust them with her past, and her ties to the rival kingdom of Tortall.

She continued to watch the crowd.

There were spells written deep within the walls that surrounded the Balitang home. They appeared as shimmering silver blazes in Aly's Sight. As the procession passed through the gate, she saw magic surmounting the stones, wood, and carvings. It was partially covered by the silvery gleam of common magical signs for protection and health that any house possessed. Unless someone else in Rajmuat had the Sight in the strength Aly had it, no one would see or sense anything but the everyday spells. Raka mages were very good at keeping their work hidden.

Ornately carved pillars lined the long front porch and framed the front door of Balitang House. The roof was layered, each lesser roof sporting upturned ends. After the summer's heat and rains, and the winter's cold and rains, with no staff to keep the place up, the house should have looked run-down. But this house gleamed. Not one clay tile was missing from the roof. The stucco was the color of fresh milk. Gold and silver leaf glimmered on the eaves and on the carved wood above the posts.

The staff was lined up on either side of the flagstone road. They wore luarin tunics and breeches, hose, raka wrapped jackets and sarongs, or combinations of styles in an explosion of colors that made Aly blink. Housemaids wore white headcloths; the men wore round white caps. They all looked to be wearing every piece of jewelry they owned.

Aly counted. Nearly sixty people were here, not including the men-at-arms. Balitang House was fully staffed as it had been the previous spring.

The duchess could not afford this. When King Oron had exiled them, he had made them show their loyalty with gold, emptying Duke Mequen's coffers. Winnamine had drawn on her dowry to pay household costs. If Prince Rubinyan had not virtually commanded her to return to court, she would have remained at Tanair, which was affordable.

“Fesgao,” Aly murmured. The man had come to stand by her elbow. “Who's paying for this?”

“Don't worry,” the raka man told her. “Ulasim will explain.” He went to help the duchess out of the litter.

Aly looked at the steps. Ulasim waited there, smiling. He was a hard-muscled man in his forties with the brown skin of a full-blood raka. His nose had been mashed against his face on several occasions by someone not kindly disposed toward him. A tightness in Aly's heart loosened at the sight of the head footman. He was the leader of the far-flung raka conspiracy, wise and strong at every trial. He had turned Aly's suspicion into respect. Back under Ulasim's wing, the Balitang family seemed much less exposed. Back under Ulasim's eye, Aly could turn to her specialty and leave him to deal with assassins and alliances.

The big raka bowed to Winnamine. As Aly watched, reading his lips, Ulasim told the duchess that they had not spent money they did not have. He reassured her that all would be explained to her satisfaction once she'd had a chance to eat and rest. As he soothed her, Aly identified a familiar face at Ulasim's elbow. Quedanga, the housekeeper since Sarai was born, had stayed in Rajmuat when the family left the city. She had now returned to Balitang House.

“How did they afford this?” Dove murmured as Aly handed her down from the litter.

“It will be a lovely tale,” Aly replied, her voice sweet. “Some parts may even be true.”

Dove looked up at Aly, smiling slightly. "You sound as if you wouldn't put it past them to have raided the royal treasury."

Aly raised an eyebrow at her mistress. "Do you think they wouldn't, my lady?"

Dove sighed. "I hope not. It would complicate things." Dove had understatement down to an art.

Hands folded in front of her, Aly followed Dove toward the house. They did not get far. A tall woman stepped onto the porch. She was a silver-haired luarin with perfect posture. Her luarin-style gown was pale blue with a high collar. Instead of the traditional overrobe, she wore a stole like the raka wrapped jacket, made of shimmering white lawn.

Sarai and Dove looked at each other. "*Aunt Nuritin*," they whispered in shock.

Aly had heard of Nuritin Balitang—or as Sarai and Dove called her, the Dragon. Though Duke Mequen had been technically the head of the family, it was his aunt who ruled it. When he had sunk into mourning for his first duchess, it was Nuritin who had badgered him into making a new marriage and a new life. Among the Balitangs, her word was law. Among the nobles of her generation, her opinion was the first they sought.

It did not bode well that she looked very comfortable in Balitang House.

Winnamine was the first to recover. She approached the old woman with outstretched hands and an apparently genuine smile on her face. "Aunt Nuritin, it's wonderful to see you. Girls, come greet your great-aunt. Elsren, Petranne, come."

Aly looked at Ulasim and made sure the nobles couldn't see her before she hand-signed: *Does she live here?*

Ulasim nodded slightly.

Again Aly's fingers flew. *Are we safe with her in the house?*

Ulasim came over to whisper, "As safe as anywhere in Rajmuat. We're stuck with the old Stormwing, and that's that. She will learn nothing we do not allow her to."

Aly shook her head. "Well, then," she said, "we'll all just be one happy family. What harm could come of that?"

Once inside, the duchess looked at her late husband's aunt. "Lady Nuritin, may we have some time to settle in before we talk? I'm not at my best so early in the morning, and this is quite a surprise."

"Of course you need rest," the old woman said. "Go. Bathe, change, unpack, take naps if you must. We shall have our talk after lunch, and I can explain everything then."

The family headed for the stairs and the private rooms that opened off the second-floor gallery. The inside of the house was as refurbished as the outside. Teak floors glowed under fresh polish. Seashell inlays along the ceilings and floors gleamed. Frescoes were freshly colored by painstaking hands. The furnishings were influenced by raka, not luarin, taste. Flowers blazed in pottery vases as colorful as the blooms themselves. Hemp rugs with bright borders lay on the floors.

Dove and Sarai had suites of chambers connected by a shared bathing room. Aly looked around Dove's rooms and smiled. There were books on shelves on two sides of the room, books on the bedside table, and candles placed for reading. Dove had covered her walls with maps. Here was every island of the realm, as well as a large map that included the Isles, the Yamani Islands, and the Eastern and Southern Lands. The desk was set with inkwells, quills, and paper.

As Dove bathed, Aly unpacked for them both. She also searched the room, though she expected that her pack of spies had gone over every inch of the house. Mages had renewed all the common spells. She also found more concealed workings against eavesdroppers and watchers, strong ones that made her raise her brows in admiration. Aly had worried that someone might sneak something nasty and magical into the house without Ochobu there to supervise, but the old mage had told her the house would be made safe.

Over the winter Ulasim had told Aly that Ysul, the Chain's mage in the Windward District of

Rajmuat, where Balitang House stood, was second in rank to Ochobu herself and her equal in power. Aly looked forward to meeting this Ysul. She hoped he would be easier to work with than the cranky luarin-hating Ochobu. Now, seeing the power in what he had done, Aly prayed he could live in the same house with the fierce old woman.

When she had finished her inspection of Dove's quarters, Ali moved into Sarai's bedchamber and study. Sarai's maid, Boulaj, one of Aly's trainees, had already begun her search of the room for spy magics and bolt-holes where someone could eavesdrop. Aly watched. Security was even more important for Sarai. She was impetuous and hot tempered, unlike the cool-headed Dove. Since the deaths of her father and his killer, Prince Bronau, Sarai had become hard to handle. She didn't care what she said about the king who had sent them into exile or his family. Aly didn't want any rash words Sarai might let fall in her bedroom to reach palace ears.

"Very good," she told Boulaj when the woman had finished. "You must have had an excellent teacher."

Boulaj grinned, her horsy face lighting up. "She was modest, too."

Once Dove and Sarai had finished their baths, Aly had time for a wash and a change of dress. She then padded down the servants' stair to the work quarters of the Balitang servants and slaves. In the kitchen Chenaol the cook greeted Aly with a firm hug and kisses on both cheeks, then stuffed a warm meat pasty into Aly's hands and jerked her head toward one of the kitchen exits.

Junai, Aly's former guard, waited there, her face expressionless as usual. Now that Aly was to work with her spies, Junai had been assigned to the post of Dove's bodyguard at Aly's recommendation. As a fighter Junai had a place in the rebellion's inner circle, but she also had an aptitude for spy work, to the surprise of her father, Ulasim. Aly had not been surprised. For someone with no magic, Junai had often been virtually invisible when she had guarded Aly. She was a silent and accomplished tracker with deft hands, muscles like wire cables, and Ulasim's quick intelligence as well as his sharp brown eyes. Her fine black hair was braided out of her way, and she favored the highland raka's tunic and leggings.

"You missed me so much I can't even have lunch before you sweep me up in a whirlwind of affection," Aly said as she followed the older woman down a hall in the service wing of the house where the nobles never went. "I knew it was only a matter of time before I won you over."

Junai glanced back at her. "Some of your pack of spies are waiting in the meeting room," she said. "The men will come soon. And this is your personal office." She halted at the last right-hand door in the hall and opened it to reveal a decently sized workroom with maps and slates on the walls. Aly guessed it had formerly been used to store furniture, but now it was ready for her use, complete with a large worktable, chairs, writing supplies, and that glimmer of hidden magical spells for security.

Junai closed the door to Aly's office. "The general meeting room is here." The raka opened the door on the left-hand side of the hall.



DRAGONS, CROWS, AND DOVES

Aly walked in to find a much larger room, with a counter along two walls and a series of cupboards along the wall shared with the outside passageway. A number of chairs of all shapes and sizes filled the open floor. Six of them were occupied by the women of Aly's pack. All looked up at her: Boulala, the plump sisters Atisa and Guchol, pert Kioka, lovely Eyun, and little Jimarn.

Guchol grinned at Aly. "Oh, good! Duani's here."

Atisa slipped to the floor to stretch her legs in a split. "Does that mean we may go home now?" Her black hair tumbled over her face.

Aly plumped herself into a chair. "If you want to go home, you may, my ducks, but you'll miss using the training I beat into you this winter. Where are the lads?"

"Here," a man said as seven of them entered the room. Junai closed the door as they traded greetings with the women and found places to sit.

"Gods bless us," Aly began as they quieted. "Our pack is reunited and the stakes have gone up." A number of them nodded. "I trust you've been good lads and lasses and kept up your exercises when you were not under my eye?" She raised a brow as she looked around the room.

"We've been checking the backgrounds of all the new people in the house, those that weren't chosen by Ulasim before our ladies' exile," Yoyox said, smoothing his mustache. He was nearly as fine a pickpocket as Aly. "And using the gossip network set up before the family got exiled. It's good. Quedanga, the housekeeper, she's supposed to just pass messages along, but she's experienced at collecting gossip from the common folk. She gets word from servants, slaves, artisans, priests—and they're everywhere."

"Then we'll leave Quedanga to send messages and manage the people she knows best, since we'll be dealing more with the palace and the military," Aly said. "She knows she's to pass on what she gathers to me?"

"Yes, Duani," Yoyox said so meekly that Aly had to laugh. "To add to *our* ranks"—he waved a hand to include his comrades—"we have fifteen men we've been training the way you want. Most are in this house. Some belong to households on this street, so no one will think anything if they visit often. And we've the tunnels under the house for when we don't want to draw attention to our coming and goings. Every man has been approved by Quedanga and Ysul, just like everyone who lives here."

"We have another eleven women," Jimarn added. "All in this house for the present. We have started to teach them codes, searches, and theft."

Aly nodded. This was also what she'd trained them for. Each of them had been examined by Ulasim and Ochobu before he or she was allowed to study with Aly, and she had educated them all winter. One of those series of lessons had been about choosing and teaching new recruits. Aly could not constantly look over people's shoulders here in the city, when she would have to spend most of her time gathering and studying information. She had to depend on her trainees' judgment. Now school was done, and her pack had their own work to do.

"How are your recruits doing?" she asked.

“Well,” said Yoyox. “Very well.”

Everyone nodded. Aly had learned that the raka already understood the demands of being a spy. In a land governed for three hundred bloody years by strangers, they had lived like spies to survive. Aly had simply taught her pack a number of new tricks, while they taught her their old ones.

“And what of Lady Nuritin's servants?” she asked. “How safe are they?”

“Safe,” replied Olkey, one of the men. “Her maid is a luarin, a cousin, and devoted to Nuritin. Stay by her side, doesn't snoop. The other woman, Jesi, is more of a clerk, and writes all the lady's letters and notes. She belongs to the conspiracy.”

Aly nodded. That was another worry she need not have. “Good,” she said. “I'll take reports in here during the afternoon resting time. If you need me to meet one of your recruits, bring her, or him, in here. As they nodded, she looked them over. “Playtime's over, children,” she said with a grin. “Nice job on the Example pier, by the way. There were soldiers screeching at each other as we sailed by.”

Her pack smiled or looked down, depending on their natures. Jimarn met Aly's eyes steadily. She was in charge of the Example operation.

Aly took a deep breath. “What do you have for me?”

Once her people had brought her up to date, Aly ate her cold pasty and went to the kitchen to be with another from Chenaol. As she ate that, the older woman settled in for a good talk. The cook had been Aly's first friend in the household. In her mid-fifties, plump and wickedly humorous, Chenaol had some gray in the black hair she wore in a long braid. She could flip any kind of knife or cleaver and send it straight to the center of a target faster than watchers could see, and could tell good steel from bad at a glance.

They were discussing the missing tax collectors when a messenger boy came into the kitchen. “Her Grace is wishful of you both coming to the ladies' sitting room,” he told Aly and Chenaol. “She's got a cloud on her face.”

Winnamine must be about to pop, wondering how we paid for all this splendor and why Nuritin was here, Aly thought as she and Chenaol followed the boy.

The room where the family relaxed during their leisure time was light and open, overlooking the flower gardens and the courtyard pool. The cushioned chairs and couches were elegant but comfortable. Nuritin sat in an armchair, facing Winnamine and Sarai, who shared a couch. Dove had taken her usual position, off to one side. Aly slid into her spot behind Dove as Chenaol, with a nod from the duchess, took a chair. Ulasim took his post next to the main door, the consummate footman. Ochobu entered and closed the door behind her.

“Aunt, I don't believe you know Ochobu Dodeka,” Winnamine said. “Lady Nuritin Balitang knows Ochobu.” The two older women looked each other over thoroughly as Winnamine explained, “Ochobu joined the household at Tanair. She is an excellent healer and mage, so we are honored to have her here. Ulasim is her son.”

Aly crossed her fingers. Ochobu did not always deal well with full-blood luarin, but she would have to if Lady Nuritin was living at Balitang House. Ochobu's stony gaze was not promising. Though barely five feet tall, she gave the impression of being much taller. Her long nose always looked as if it held a sniff, particularly when she looked on luarin.

If Ochobu's stare disconcerted Nuritin, the noblewoman showed no sign of it. Instead she turned her attention to Winnamine. “You will find that many things have changed from last year,” Nuritin said. Like Ochobu, her Gift showed in Aly's Sight, though Nuritin's was glowing embers compared to Ochobu's fire. Nuritin continued, “I have explained everything to the people you sent ahead”—she nodded to Chenaol—“and they certainly understood how things will be different.” She looked at Sarai. “Stand up and turn around, girl.”

Sarai obeyed with a pout. Nuritin looked her over as she might a horse. With satisfaction she said

"We'll have to take in the gowns I've had made. It's just as well I had Ulasim here escort the seamstresses to your rooms during lunch. You lost weight out there in the wilds—very good."

"Aunt!" cried Sarai, fiery roses appearing in her cheeks.

"And black makes you look sallow," Nuritin told her, adding insult to injury.

Aly ducked her head to hide a grin.

"Dovasary," Nuritin said, an actual smile on her thin lips. "Black is not *your* color, either, my dear

"It is mourning, Aunt," Dove explained. "I don't think you're supposed to look becoming in it."

"That is one of the things that has changed," Nuritin said crisply. "Her Royal Highness the prince regent ordained five months ago that full mourning was disrespectful to the Black God, who takes the dead to the Realms of Peace. She ordered that all the court put off full mourning for Kings Oron and Hazarin. The only mourning permitted to any member of the court is a discreet black armband, and perhaps black embroideries or trim. No black gowns. No black tunics. No black veils. We are to wear colors that rejoice for the peace of the dead."

"Meaning Imajane looks dreadful in black and won't wear it if she doesn't have to," Sarai remarked with spite.

Nuritin nodded. "Naturally. But it is a royal decree, with the king's seal attached. You must all put off black at court, or for that matter, anywhere that the regents may appear. It has been suggested that they will regard mourning as a sign of rebellion."

"Aunt," said Winnamine quietly. Everyone looked at her. The duchess stood, arms folded. "You said you had dresses made up. You sent seamstresses up to our family rooms. And there are *these*."

She indicated two open chests. One was filled with money and topped by a clutch of parchment. Aly sharpened her magical vision to read the first of them: it was a letter of credit, issued to the duchess. Next to it was a much smaller chest that bore the crest of the duchess's own family, the Fonfalas. It, too, was open. It held jewelry: gold chains, necklaces, eardrops, and strings of colorful pearls. Most were in old-fashioned or broken settings.

"The Fonfalas sent those," explained Ulasim. "They gave their permission for us to melt down the pieces and sell the stones, but we thought we should wait for you to decide."

"And the servants?" asked Winnamine, glaring down at Nuritin. "Where did they come from?"

Ulasim cleared his throat politely. Everyone looked at him. "Many of our new servants come from Lady Sarai and Lady Dove's grandfather, the baron Temaida. The servants are paid by the Temaida and clothed by them." He met Winnamine's startled look with a reassuring one of his own. "This is family policy among the raka nobles, Your Grace. When a Temaida girl comes of age at sixteen, she receives a staff of her own, because marriage alliances mean so much to the raka nobility. They want their daughters to appear to advantage."

"Very sensible," said Nuritin with a nod of approval. Slowly Winnamine sat again.

"Your Grace, you were Lady Sarugani's best friend," Chenaol added, referring to Sarai and Dove's mother. "You should remember it is the custom."

Ulasim continued, "They were unable to manage it last year, so they fulfill their duty to the kinswomen this year. The baron sent his regrets that he will not be coming to the city for some time or he would call on you personally, but he knows that you will treat his granddaughters well."

Meaning last year they were afraid to help the Balitangs when they were out of favor, and this year they don't want to draw attention to their presence, Aly thought. Who can blame them? *I* wouldn't want to belong to the raka nobility of the Isles. It's like living with a knife at your throat. And Ulasim can't tell Her Grace that the Temaidas know Sarai may be queen soon. They're the ones who secretly carried the Haiming royal blood for three centuries, to give it to Sarugani, and then to Sarai and Dove.

Aly hand-signaled Fesgao, out of the Balitang ladies' line of sight: *These new people have been investigated?* Her pack would have checked them, too, but Aly was cautious.

Fesgao replied with a nod and signed, *All hand-picked*. Aly relaxed. Ulasim would have made doubly sure no one suspicious came into Balitang service.

"I can't possibly accept all this," said the duchess, sitting down once more. She was pale. "I can never repay it."

"You are not a fool, Winnamine," Nuritin said flatly. "Don't act like one."

The duchess frowned. Her chin came up.

"You will take all this, and you will deck this house and your children in the finest you can buy," Nuritin informed the duchess. "I am sorry—I mourn my nephew's murder, too." She smoothed her braided black armband with fingers that shook. "But politics doesn't wait, and there is work to be done quickly. I had clothes made for all of you, but they must be fitted properly *today*. Tomorrow you are commanded to present yourselves to His Majesty and the regents at court. I believe Her Highness may have intended to humiliate you by summoning you immediately, so she could make fun of your appearance in outmoded clothes. Well! She may be regent, but she cannot be allowed to toy with her nobles in this fashion. I intend for her to fail."

"Who cares if Her Highness plays games with us or not?" Winnamine's gaze was still adamant. "I certainly did not return to accept charity."

Nuritin sniffed. "My dear young woman, has the highland air made you stupid? It is an *investment* in you. When no one spoke, Nuritin sighed. "You must build a power base for King Dunevon's heir, goos. Elsren is next in line for the throne. He will need friends and support. Our families agreed that setting you up is worth whatever we might dredge from our coffers." She looked at Sarai. "Men will hang after *you* to forge an alliance with our family. I expect you to *remember* your family, and the interests of your family. Flirt with those men, learn their minds, and promise them nothing."

Sarai's mouth trembled. "I have not done so well in my flirtations lately," she replied softly. "If you haven't heard, my last lover killed Papa. And where were the Balitangs, and the Fonfalas, and the Temaidas, when we were in danger?"

Nuritin's thin eyebrows snapped together. "Your last lover? Do not tell me you forgot what you owe to the family by tumbling Bronau."

Sarai gasped in indignation. Winnamine rose to stand with Sarai. Dove did the same. "Sarai would never disgrace us by bedding a man of whom her father did not approve," said Winnamine, who Sarai's cheeks turned a beet color.

Nuritin's eyes were on Sarai. "Bronau deserved to die," she said, her voice flat. "You and your sister did the realm a service by killing him. You also saved his brother the embarrassment of paying an executioner." She looked at the duchess and at Dove. "Is she a fool? Better to lock her up than have her ruin things for us at court. It is not the place to stumble, not after this winter. The regents have proved to be less than patient."

"She is no fool, Aunt," replied Dove. "She just thinks the family's drawing back from us was wrong. Winna and I understood—Papa understood—the family had to save themselves from the taint of our disgrace. Sarai just hasn't made her peace with it."

"Then make your peace," Nuritin said tartly. "You have a duty to Elsren and to your stepmother, but you don't care for the duty you owe to our royal blood."

"I never had to worry about that before," Sarai retorted, her mouth mulish.

"Before there were several heirs between your family and the throne. Now there is only one. You will marry to your *brother's* advantage, which is the *family's* advantage." Nuritin inspected the faces of those before her. Then she nodded. "Come upstairs. We need to get your new clothes fitted this afternoon. And I want to see Elsren."

The afternoon dissolved in a flurry of fabrics and flashing needles. The Balitang clan had mustered an army of seamstresses to work on the ladies' new wardrobes all winter long, using Nuritin's preci-

memory for the Tanair Balitangs' height, weight, and measurements. The old woman was surprised to find that everyone, not just Sarai, had to have their clothes taken in. Winter had been lean.

Aly, Boulaj, and even the duchess's personal maid, Pembery, found themselves elbowed out of the way by women who sewed at a speed they could not match. Aly finally slid out and spent the remaining daylight hours inspecting the house and grounds.

Out in the garden an open-sided square pavilion glowed with extra-powerful spells against eavesdropping. Inside it, Aly could hear nothing, not even the artificial waterfall that hissed over rocks beside it. It was perfect for secret conversations.

"Come to me," a familiar voice said behind her. "The air is dead under that roof."

Aly turned and smiled. The new arrival was nearly six feet tall, with skin the color of dark sugar syrup. She hadn't seen Nawat Crow in five days, and as always when they'd been apart, she realized that she had missed him. Everything about him made her happy. He appeared to be about nineteen or twenty, with glossy black hair. His deep-set brown eyes were alert to any movement around him. The young woman who didn't follow him with her eyes when he passed was rare. The women who lingered when they got to know him were even more rare. Nawat's grasp on humanity was light, to say the least. It was perfectly understandable: despite his apparent age, Nawat was three years old as a crow and had spent only a year as a man. More often than not, he acted first as a crow might, then on belatedly and occasionally as a human.

Their friendship had begun when he was a crow teaching her the crows' language at Kyprioth's request. During those lessons Aly had fascinated Nawat so much that he had changed himself into human, something he told her that all crows could do. Seeing him made her pulse quicken as she left the pavilion. He wore clean clothes and he'd finger-combed his damp, crow-black hair back from his face. His feet were bare. "You forgot shoes," Aly reminded him. Resting her hand on his chest, she stood on tiptoe for his kiss.

Nawat stepped back.

Aly stared at him, her hand dropping to her side. She felt almost as if he'd slapped her. "No kisses," she asked, keeping her voice light. "I'm crushed."

"You said I must not kiss you in front of people," he reminded her. "You said they will think you are frivolous if we are kissing."

"But we're not in public," she explained patiently. "Listen. No one's outside. We could go behind the tree—Nawat, it's just a *kiss*."

She took a step forward, reaching for his jacket lapel. Nawat took another step back. "I have been thinking," he said. "You will let me kiss you and preen you, but you will not mate with me. I think you are a mixed-up human. You think that mating is not important if you have kisses and preening. If I do not kiss you and preen you, I think you will want to mate with me. To have nestlings. To be with me all our days."

Aly rubbed her temples. Sometimes it was very hard to get a former crow to see things properly. "I didn't say I won't mate with you because we kiss and preen," she said patiently, remembering how close to mating some of that preening had gotten. "I can't be distracted. It's going to be a dangerous spring and summer. This is a horrible time to mate. We can't risk it."

"All life is a risk, Aly," he told her soberly, reaching a hand out to her, then hastily lowering it. "At any moment an archer may shoot you, or a hawk break your neck. A forest fire or a volcano will burn you. A Bronau will stab you. Risk will not end if the god gets his islands back."

Aly sighed. "No, but my task will be done, and then we can mate."

"And what if you are killed?" Nawat wanted to know. "What if I am killed? What if a Bronau steals you away?"

Sometimes a crow cannot be argued with, thought Aly, feeling a little impatient. Sometimes you

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