

Swords and Salt

(The Complete Series)

by Lindsay Buroker

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A Question of Honor

(Swords & Salt, Tale 1)

Part I

The bamboo cage rattled as it descended into the depths of the earth, the cool stale air laced with the scent of old sweat. Pressed into the corner by far too many bodies for such a small space, Yanko struggled to keep his breathing slow and even, to loosen the tightness clutching his chest.

It's a lift going into a mine, not a cage being hurled down a dragon's throat. People do this every day. Perfectly normal people who suffer no ill effects because they toil in the darkness from dawn to dusk, never spending time under the sun.

The man next to Yanko inhaled deeply and coughed, a moist throaty cough. In the darkness, he didn't see the phlegmy spittle fly from the miner's mouth, but a gooey gob spattered against his cheek.

All right, maybe not no ill effects...

This wasn't the first miner who had coughed or sneezed on Yanko that morning. Of course, that might have more to do with being related to the controller than any true medical issues. His uncle must have mentioned his impending arrival, for several of the bleary-eyed men, reporting for work before dawn, had given him dark looks. Someone had thrust a pickaxe against his chest hard enough that it might have broken ribs if Yanko hadn't anticipated the blow and tensed his muscles. Though he had loathed the hours of combat training he had endured in the last few years, they had inculcated useful instincts.

The cage jerked, the floor trembling beneath his feet. Yanko would have flailed for something to hold onto, but the bodies pinning him into the corner kept him upright.

Lantern light appeared between the bamboo bars. Yanko stood on his tiptoes and craned his neck, trying to see beyond the men in front of him. At five foot nine, he wasn't short by Nurian standards, but many of the peasant workers had mixed blood, and some of the burly

miners were Turgonian prisoners. Those were the ones who had glowered especially menacingly at Yanko, as if the enmity between their peoples was his fault.

The bamboo door opened, and the miners shuffled out.

“Shaft Thirteen,” a gruff voice said.

The miners shouldered their pickaxes, bowed their heads, and walked past a lean man in yellow and orange robes that remained vibrant despite the dim lighting. Nothing else about him was vibrant. Furrows pinched his eyebrows together in a perpetual frown, and gray streaked the black hair flowing down from his topknot. He had the almond eyes and yellow-brown skin of a pureblood Nurian, and Yanko could see many of his father’s features reflected in the man’s narrow face: a snub nose and pointed chin. Yanko had the same skin and eyes, but a broader face; he had always wondered if he took after his mother, but he’d never dared ask.

After fortifying himself with a deep breath—some of the sweat vapors had dissipated with the miners’ departure—Yanko stepped off the lift. He pressed his palms together before his chest and bowed his head. “Honored Uncle. As my father bade, I have come to assist you in the mines.”

“Assist me, eh?” Uncle Mishnal withdrew a parchment scroll from his robes, unrolled it, held it up to one of the whale oil lanterns guttering on the wall, and read aloud. “The boy’s warrior-mage exams are in six months, but he dawdles with his training and his studies. He would rather make flowers than fire, and he prefers composing poetry to practicing with blades. Please harden the boy, so he won’t disgrace the family any further than it already has been. He is our only hope at redemption in this generation.”

Though the temperature fifty meters below the earth’s surface was cooler than that of the sun-beaten scrublands above, Yanko’s cheeks warmed with impressive heat. Studying the earth sciences was a perfectly respectable passion, and he had only made a flower *once*, intending to leave it for Arayevo as a gift she might appreciate. And the poetry had been for her, too, or it would have been if he had ever

found the courage to recite it for her. His father had simply chosen an inopportune moment to barge into the room and stumble across it.

“Honored Uncle,” Yanko said, continuing to use the formal greeting since he hadn’t had many interactions with his father’s brother in his life and no idea what to expect, “I am competent with a blade and have studied the thermal sciences.” Though not to a degree that he’d claim competence with them. He thought he could stick a sword in an enemy’s heart to defend himself, but the idea of roasting a human being like a lamb shank... His belly always went queasy at the thought. Not for the first time, he wondered what kind of “hardening” his father might have in mind.

“Competent, eh? We shall see.”

Uncle Mishnal strode across the empty chamber—the miners had disappeared down one of several tunnels supported with wooden timbers—and touched a communication orb mounted on a pedestal carved from the same grayish white salt that formed the walls and floor. He folded his arms into his voluminous sleeves and gazed down a tunnel. Faint clanks and clinks had been drifting up from it since Yanko had arrived, but a new sound joined the noise, the clomp of footsteps.

A queue of figures shambled into view, all with their hair and beards uniformly cut to within a half inch of their skin. New workers for the mines, none of them practitioners nor men from honored families their lack of long locks said. Some were Nurian, but more were foreigners. Yanko wondered where they had come from, given how many years had passed since the last war. The men wore all manner of clothing, some the colorful loose layers common in the homeland and others drabber brown and gray wools and cottons. An aborigine wore furs, another man wore a sari, and two were clad in the faded remains of Turgonian military uniforms. Many had scarred faces and calloused hands. They didn’t speak as they lined up in front of Mishnal. Silver control collars glowed at their necks. Perhaps they weren’t *allowed* to speak.

“Prisoners?” Yanko whispered. He had shifted closer to his uncle

without realizing it. He hadn't lied about his competence with a sword, but his father hadn't sent any weapons with him, and these looked like the sorts of men he could expect to meet *after* he finished his five years of training at Stargrind, not before.

"Criminals," Uncle Mishnal said, not lowering his own voice.

He stared down the men without fear, clearly confident the collars would keep them in line. There would be a control orb in his office somewhere, attuned to his thoughts, allowing him to manipulate the men. As one sensitive to the use of Science, Yanko could feel the presence of many other collars in the miles of mines stretching out around, above, and below him.

"Choose one," Uncle Mishnal said.

"Huh?" Yanko blurted, then realized he had better phrase his... bewilderment in a more respectful manner. "I mean, for what purpose, honored Uncle?"

Mishnal merely extended an arm toward the men. "Choose an enemy."

If that was supposed to be an answer, it wasn't a comforting one. Why would anyone choose to make an enemy of a stranger? And what would Yanko be expected to do *with* his new enemy? Or—his gut twitched—to his new enemy? Was this to be a test? To see if he could kill a man? Surely such things wouldn't be expected until he finished his training and walked out on a battlefield...

"Choose," his uncle repeated, his voice hard this time. There was nothing reassuring in his dark brown eyes.

Yanko held back a frustrated sigh and took a step toward the queue, surveying the offerings. The biggest was a broad-shouldered, olive-skinned man in brown wool trousers and a loose beige wrap that didn't quite hide the thickness of his arms or pectoral muscles. Old brown bloodstains spattered one side of that wrap—they might have come from him, but probably not. The hale man stood straight, his short, gray-specked brown hair brushing the ceiling, and glowered challengingly with his single eye—an ugly knot of scar tissue lay where the left should have been. That missing eye was the only hint that he

might have weaknesses, but Yanko doubted his uncle would judge him unfavorably for choosing the man as an opponent. The Turgonians and the Nurians had been enemies for centuries, warring at least once a generation, and imperial soldiers were known for their power, ferocity, and willingness to die for their empire. Yanko didn't want to kill anyone, but he thought it would be easier to deal with a Turgonian than one of his own countrymen, criminal or not. He wasn't so young that he didn't understand that men, especially in these times, sometimes came to crime by necessity rather than a willingness to dishonor one's family and tribe. The Turgonian must have been caught spying or assassinating people inside Nuria's borders. To kill him would not leave a stain on his soul.

Mishnal shifted his weight, and Yanko thrust out a finger before he could grow more impatient. "Him."

If the Turgonian felt distress or pleasure at being picked, he didn't show it. Worse, his glower, which had been focused on his controller, shifted to Yanko. The cold penetrating stare made him want to hide behind his uncle. Yanko frowned at himself. He wasn't a child any more; such instincts were embarrassing. As a warrior-mage, he would be expected to face men like this all the time.

Yes, but you don't want to become a warrior-mage.

He shook away the thought. It was even less acceptable than fear. His family was relying on him to redeem its honor. His path had been carved into a granite mountain at three years old, when he had first shown aptitude for the Science.

"Very well," Uncle Mishnal said. His tone wasn't any more revealing than the Turgonian's face. At least he wasn't scowling.

Mishnal waved a hand and all of the "criminals" except for the Turgonian shuffled back the way they had come, collecting pickaxes and shovels from a rack along the way.

"Come," Mishnal said, then grabbed a lantern and headed for another tunnel, a broad passage with the corners worn smooth by time and the brush of thousands of bodies passing. The wooden supports had petrified, secure for eons by the preserving nature of the salt.

Yanko didn't want the Turgonian at his back, so he extended a hand, inviting the man to go first. His new enemy was still glowering at him. But, as Uncle Mishnal disappeared into the tunnel, the golden collar flashed. The Turgonian jerked around and walked after him with the awkward stiffness of a marionette. Yanko winced at the indignity, but he reminded himself that nothing less than evil could have brought the man to this fate.

In the tunnels, they passed workers on errands and big *sazchen* lizards pulling carts of salt blocks along rails toward the lift. Practitioner-crafted harnesses kept the cold-blooded creatures comfortable in the chilly air, so they could work tirelessly for hours, their strength equal to that of five men.

After passing the food hall and kitchen, storage chambers, and a lizard stable, Uncle Mishnal led them into an oval room with a high ceiling. He lit lanterns all along the perimeter, revealing a rack of scimitars, sabers, pole arms, and *kyzar*—the short stabbing swords used for closing and finishing an opponent. Alcoves at the four compass points of the room displayed statues of the war gods: wolf, lion, viper, and crocodile. They were carved from the same grayish white salt as the walls.

Uncle Mishnal faced Yanko. "Choose a weapon."

Still not certain what to expect, Yanko hesitated. His uncle's brows lowered. Yanko hustled to the rack. His father was already displeased with him; the last thing he needed was an unflattering report to be sent home on his first day.

He selected the saber and *kyzar*, the weapons he'd trained with most often.

The Turgonian stood in the doorway, his eye shifting to watch every move, though he gave away nothing of his thoughts. His face might as well have been carved from the same salt as the statues. Yanko wasn't sure what he had expected from a Turgonian, but it had involved more sneers and snarls and perhaps some violent fist shaking. After all, most of the empire's enemies called them gorillas, if rarely to their faces. Yanko admitted he found the cold stillness more

disconcerting.

“Choose a weapon,” Uncle Mishnal said again.

At first, Yanko thought the words were for him, that his uncle didn’t approve of his selection, but Mishnal switched to another language and spoke again. The long stream of sentences must have included more than his earlier three words. Maybe the Turgonian was receiving instructions as to what to expect. Yanko wished *he* were.

The big man strode toward the rack. Whatever this was, it wasn’t a simple slaying. As the Turgonian selected a double-edged long sword, lifting it to his eye to sight down the blade, Yanko didn’t know if he should be relieved or not. He eyed the fellow’s corded forearms—the loose sleeves had fallen to his elbows. Probably not.

The Turgonian also selected a round shield, then faced the room. His arms hung loosely at his sides, but the calm, casual way he held the weapons... he had been fighting all of his life. Yanko could tell. The man might not be wearing the remains of a military uniform, the way some of the other criminals had been, but he had no doubt this was a veteran of many battles.

“We are... to spar, honored Uncle?” Yanko asked, trying not to show how daunted he felt.

“Spar? You must try to kill him.”

Er. Speaking of daunted...

“Will he be trying to kill *me*?”

Uncle Mishnal chuckled. “You will have to learn a few phrases of Turgonian to ask that question of him, but I should think so.”

Yanko didn’t find any of this amusing.

“I will prevent him from doing so.” Mishnal waved at the collar. As far as Yanko had heard, his uncle wasn’t a practitioner himself, but many mundane people were adept enough to use tools crafted by Makers. His uncle had been overseeing the mines for more than a decade, so he’d doubtlessly had much practice.

“This doesn’t sound very fair,” Yanko muttered.

His uncle gave him a sharp look. “A recalcitrant lip won’t serve you kindly at Stargrind. Nor is it appropriate to speak to your elders so.”

Yanko lowered his head. "I apologize, Uncle."

The Turgonian was watching him. Yanko's cheeks warmed again. What must this grizzled veteran think? That he was some spoiled child who'd never worked in his life? Yanko would have to find a way to show him differently. He *had* spent countless hours training with Great Uncle Lao Zun while growing up, after all.

You're small, fast, and wiry. He'll be strong but slow. Dart in and out before he can strike. Approach on his blind side. You can do this, Yanko.

A sound strategy, he decided, and tried not to think about that old saying... *Everyone has a sound strategy until the first blow lands.*

Uncle Mishnal asked a question in Turgonian. The big warrior nodded once and walked to the center of the room. He flexed his muscles and stretched his fingers without releasing sword and shield. An impressive cracking of knuckles resonated through the room.

He can't kill you, Uncle Mishnal said, but how many bones is he allowed to break?

You picked him... What was wrong with the ropy little aborigine who'd probably never held a spear for more than fishing?

I wanted an opponent who wouldn't prove me a coward...

"He's ready." Uncle Mishnal's tone suggested it was the time for fighting, not for lengthy conversations with oneself.

Yanko shook his arms in an attempt to loosen muscles far too tense to allow a full range of movement, then stepped into the center of the room. He faced the man and stared him straight in the... collarbone.

"Ready?" Uncle Mishnal said. "Remember, kill him if you can."

Yanko bit his tongue to keep from uttering one of those inappropriate-to-one's-elders comments that sprang to his lips, one such as, *Should you really be saying things like that in front of him, Uncle?* Besides, it was clear the Turgonian didn't speak Nurian.

"Ready," Yanko said.

The Turgonian grunted.

"Begin," Mishnal said.

The Turgonian charged.

Yanko skittered to the side, raising his saber to defend himself. He was too slow. The round shield, its concave exterior a splash of bright blue and yellow, blurred as it filled his vision and slammed into his face. A burst of light exploded in his head, and pain bludgeoned his nose. He hit the ground before he had time to compose himself for a proper roll, the carved salt as hard as marble as his back hit, the air blasting from his lungs. Somehow he managed to keep the presence of mind to roll away, to try and put distance between him and his foe, but he couldn't move quickly enough. The weight of a mountain landed on him. He ducked his head and tried to get his hands up to protect his throat—tiger spit, he didn't even have his weapons any more—but that same mountain had pinned his arms. Calloused fingers gripped his chin, forcing it back, and an icy metal point pressed against his throat.

Though his vision was blurry, Yanko made out the cold dark eye of the Turgonian, of that brutish face inches from his own. He saw his death in that stare.

Curse the wolf god. I never wanted to be a warrior! He was certain it would be his last thought.

But before the sword could cut into his jugular, the Turgonian was flung away with such power that he crashed into the wall ten feet away.

Yanko scrambled to his feet, not certain his uncle's intervention meant the battle was over. The Turgonian had struck the wall as hard as Yanko had struck the floor, but *he* hadn't lost his weapons. Already he had regained his feet and crouched like a tiger, ready to spring. Yanko snatched up his saber and sword, using the movement to cover a quick wiping of his eyes. Though he knew the tears were a natural result of a blow to the nose, this vulnerability embarrassed him. As did his performance against the Turgonian.

"Competent, eh?" his uncle asked. It wasn't a sneer exactly, but it was said in that tone adults always used when they wanted children to know they had been wrong.

Excuses floated to Yanko's lips: nothing he'd heard about the Turgonians had suggested such speed, and he'd expected the other

man to test him first, that they would exchange a few tentative blows to judge each other before growing serious. He kept the thoughts to himself. Excuses would only make things worse.

“I did not prepare myself adequately,” Yanko said. “I will strive to improve.”

“I hope so. Six months is not a long time.” Uncle Mishnal sighed. “Son, you are the only one amongst my children and your father’s children to be born with the talent; *you* are the only one who can redeem the family in the eyes of the Great Chief. It is unfortunate that your mother... made the choice she did and that our whole clan has lost its place in society and been forced into—” he curled a lip toward the walls and ceilings of the mine, “—lesser positions. But that is the way of our world.”

“Falcon may prove himself as a marine,” Yanko said, naming his older brother. *He had* been banging at things with a wooden sword since before he could talk.

“We need more than that if we are to ever reclaim our former standing.” Mishnal pinned Yanko with a frank stare. “Your father sent your books. You will practice the Science in the mornings and spar with your chosen enemy in the afternoons.” He extended a hand toward the Turgonian, who remained by the wall, his shield and sword at the ready.

Yanko gulped. How many times could he be smashed to the floor over the course of an afternoon? Make that *multiple* afternoons? Six months’ worth.

“You made a good choice with him,” Mishnal said. “If your father and I still worked in the capital, you would have had access to the finest weapons instructors all of your life, but—”

“Great Uncle Lao Zun is a fine weapons instructor,” Yanko protested, forgetting his respectful tone again.

Mishnal’s lips tightened at the interruption. “Great Uncle Lao Zun is a quirky old man. *This—*” he nodded at the Turgonian, “—will at least offer you practical experience against a dangerous enemy who’d like to see you dead.”

How... fortunate for him.

“He agrees with that?” Yanko asked.

“He has no choice. Regardless, he should find it a refreshing break from laboring all day in the mine.”

“Even if he figures out his purpose in practicing with me is to make me good enough to kill him?” Yanko couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

His uncle’s eyes hardened. “You shame your family with your disrespectful tone. I fear for our future if you end up taking after your mother rather than your father and grandfather. I must attend to my work. I will send someone to monitor your continued training.” He stalked out of the chamber before Yanko could apologize. He had no intention of abandoning his family; he simply wanted to be able to speak his mind.

Realizing the Turgonian was still standing by the wall with his sword and shield at the ready—and that the man who controlled the collar had left—Yanko cleared his throat.

“I’m actually better at the mental sciences than I am at blade work.” He wriggled his fingers, though he had no idea if the I-can-use-my-mind-to-make-things-happen gesture was universal. He hoped so. It seemed prudent to imply that he could control the collars, the same way his uncle could. No need to let the big fellow know Mishnal would have to let Yanko key himself to the artifact before that would be true. “You would call it, *tabok*, I think. Magic?”

The Turgonian’s eyebrow twitched, but he didn’t otherwise emote, and he certainly didn’t speak.

“My specialty is Earth Science. It means I can...” Er, he probably wouldn’t impress a warrior by bragging about his ability to enhance the productivity of a beehive or speed up the composting of manure. “Well, as an example, I could convince thick ropes of grass to grow up out of the ground and wrap themselves around your legs to keep you from attacking me.” Technically true, but only if they were standing in a meadow of grass rather than on salt more than a hundred feet beneath the earth’s surface. And also only true if he had the time to

concentrate on his craft, something that was nearly impossible with an enemy soldier charging. It was the reason that even the most powerful warrior mages had bodyguards when they served in the Great Chief's armies.

Fortunately the Turgonian didn't ask him to prove the claim. He didn't ask or say anything.

"Do you understand any Nurian at all?"

No response.

"It seems odd that your people would send you over here without teaching you a few survival phrases. Or were you simply traveling here of your own volition and got into some trouble?"

What are you trying to do, Yanko? Humanize him? He's a monster—his people have killed thousands of ours, if not millions over all the centuries.

Then the Turgonian spoke. Not in Nurian, but in his own guttural, harsh tongue, one that Yanko didn't know more than ten words of. From the simple and formal-sounding sentence, he had the feeling he'd been given the Turgonian equivalent of name, rank, and clan.

Yanko repeated the litany in his mind—he had an ear for music and remembering songs after only an iteration or two, so he was reasonably confident in his memory. "Dak?" he asked, taking a guess at which word might have been a name, though it sounded a lot like that miner's phlegmy cough in the lift.

The Turgonian stared at him, then nodded once.

That meant the word before, *truchag*, might be his rank. Yanko didn't know what that translated to, but he made a note to ask someone. Not his uncle. He doubted his uncle would approve of him talking to the prisoner.

So, why are you doing it, eh?

"I'm Yanko," he said anyway, touching his chest.

The Turgonian didn't respond. He probably didn't care. He probably understood his purpose here even if he hadn't grasped the language. He might even now be thinking that he had to kill Yanko before Yanko succeeded in killing him.

Footsteps sounded in the tunnel, and a middle-aged man entered. He wore robes less decorated than Mishnal's but of the same yellow and orange color scheme.

"You are to train with the prisoner," the man said. As an overseer, he must also have the ability to control the collars. "I will keep him from injuring you severely."

But minor to moderate injuries were acceptable? Wonderful.

"Begin."

Yanko took a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

Part 2

It was called the screw. Four men walked in circles around a pole, pushing wooden bars that spun a wheel that in turn raised carts of salt from the lower levels. Sweat snaked down the bare backs of the unlucky men chosen for the task, Yanko included. By the end of his third hour at the machine, his raw palms bled and his back felt like it had been trampled on by an elephant. Drumbeats drifting down from an overseer's platform were intended to encourage one to ignore the pain and keep up with the pace. Yanko wished the perky musician would fall off the platform and into the mine depths more than fifty meters below.

"No," the man behind him whispered in response to some muttered question from the man behind *him*. They shared laughter.

The chuckles might have nothing to do with him, but Yanko flushed anyway. When he'd stepped into a slot at the screw, the workers had given him perplexed looks, doubtlessly wondering why someone with hair that fell halfway down his back was toiling in the mines with them. A peasant might labor alongside prisoners of war and work camp detainees, risking his or her life for payment in lucrative salt, but not someone from an honored family.

A few meters away, on the platform where the carts were unloaded, men made way as an overseer led in a line of replacements. Yanko's Turgonian was with them. Dak. Yanko glared at him. They'd been meeting daily to "train" for the last week. It had consisted of nothing more than Yanko receiving thrashings every time. Though the Turgonian never said a word, Yanko always had the impression he was eager to end the sparring sessions as quickly as possible, maybe discouraging him intentionally in the hopes that Yanko would request another opponent. So much for Uncle Mishnal's theory that the man would appreciate time away from the monotony of mine work. As for Yanko, thus far, all he'd gotten better at was ducking and dodging the

Turgonian's all-too-accurate swings. Defensive skills might be useful, but his blade work could have improved more under Great Uncle Lao Zun's tutelage.

Dak went to work without looking toward Yanko. He unhooked carts as they rose and pushed them into the tracks where another man harnessed them to a lizard. The work placed him near the edge of a wooden platform that stretched out over a cliff. It dropped fifty meters to the next level of the mine, with nothing except hard ground below. Yanko supposed it wasn't mature of him to contemplate running over and shoving his training partner over the cliff.

"Is he pushing at all?" came a whisper from behind him.

"...don't know. Got some muscles for a sprig, but don't know how to use 'em."

"...heard he's related to the controller."

"Better not step on his feet then."

Yanko flushed at being caught daydreaming and leaned into the bar. There was no point in dwelling upon fantasies. If he was going to think about something, it ought to be a strategy that would work against the big fighter. So far, his be-faster-and-approach-on-his-blind-side tactic hadn't proved fruitful. The bastard was fast himself, far more so than someone that size had any right to be.

Yanko watched Dak haul another full cart over the edge of the platform, wondering if he had some other weakness that might be exploited. As he muscled the cart onto the tracks, the Turgonian leaned close to another man with olive skin, one who'd just come in, leading a pair of fresh lizards to the carts. The two men shared a few whispered words while attaching harnesses. The overseer standing on the musician's platform above didn't seem to notice.

Yanko felt his heartbeats quicken. Were those two simply sharing words because they had some kinship, or were they planning some conspiracy? An escape? Worse?

The Turgonian glanced his way, as if he had heard the thoughts. Yanko avoided his eye, pretending the bar occupied his attention.

It's probably nothing. Ignore it.

But if the Turgonian was planning something that could affect the whole mine, it would mean trouble for his uncle. A mass exodus of escaped prisoners or something else that closed the mine would reflect poorly on him—and the family. If their clan suffered more setbacks, the Great Chief might shave everyone’s head and take the last vestiges of their status, including their land and their right to participate in government.

Stop it, Yanko. You’re letting your imagination charge around like an elephant tangled in the clothesline.

Of course, if the Turgonian was conspiring, it would be my duty to report it. He’d be punished... maybe worse... and I’d get a new sparring partner, maybe one who doesn’t pound my face into the ground ten times a day...

“Look out, gorilla. You’re stepping on people with those giant dung kissers.” A Nurian pointed to Dak’s booted feet.

“That’s right. He stepped on me more than once,” said a second man, one who’d just arrived and who hadn’t been by all morning. Quite a few people had just arrived. All Nurian. The Turgonian that Dak had been speaking to earlier was gone.

He stood alone on the platform, taller than those around him, but alone nonetheless. He had been about to pull a new cart off the ropes, but he’d stopped to face his accusers. His back was to the cliff, to the fall.

“Turg dogs aren’t anything but trouble when they end up in the mines,” the first speaker said. Others were gathering around him, some with pickaxes and others with chains or clubs.

Dak was unarmed. That didn’t mean he wasn’t dangerous, but the odds were against him, and he had little room in which to maneuver.

“Must be why they never last long down here,” a new man said, this one at the back of the mob.

Others nodded grimly. One chuckled, his eyes gleaming in the lamplight. A scar ran across his scalp, and he was missing several fingers. Maybe he anticipated reciprocating some revenge suffered at Turgonian hands long ago.

This is your chance, Yanko realized, as the mob closed on Dak. He wouldn't have to raise a hand to get rid of his training room nemesis. Someone else was going to do it for him.

The Turgonian had bent his knees and his arms hung loose and ready, but he stole a glance at the platform above. The overseer *should* have been standing up there, watching the workers and playing the drum to keep them moving in synch. But the music had stopped, and he'd disappeared. This had been planned.

The sweat dripping down Yanko's back had grown clammy. With sudden certainty, he knew this collusion, this planning to commit a murder, had happened before. Even if the Turgonian was a criminal and came from a loathed enemy nation, this... wasn't honorable.

Before he'd decided on a plan of action, Yanko found himself walking away from the screw. The workers had stepped onto the wooden platform and were inching closer to Dak, their weapons brandished. The Turgonian hadn't given any ground, but he hadn't much ground to give. In seconds, he would have to decide to try and push past or to stand and fight.

Yanko cleared his throat and lifted his hand. "Sorry to interrupt, but I was curious if you fellows wanted some help."

The men stopped their advances and stared at him.

"Because ten against one doesn't seem unsporting enough, does it?" Yanko said. "I have a few tricks that might come in handy. Like perhaps you want me to hold him down?" He stretched out a hand and plucked a familiar technique from his mind.

Vines appeared to spurt from the wooden planks of the platform. They waved in the air and stretched toward the ringleader, as if to entwine his legs. The man stepped back. Good. It was only an illusion. As Yanko had lamented earlier, he couldn't easily access the nature sciences down here with nothing except salt and air to draw upon. The men murmured uneasily. Yanko's heart was racing, and it had nothing to do with the mental effort the illusion required. He had grown up wielding the Science, but he had never used his skills away from his kin or those who knew him—he'd certainly never tried to cow

strangers with it. And these workers might very well resent the intrusion of a practitioner; his presence had to be a reminder that because of fate he could aspire to a much greater station in life than they.

The men traded glances with each other. Nervous glances. Yanko made the tallest vine grow up, waving in the air like a snake. It reached for the ringleader's face.

The man skittered back, bumping into the others to dodge the sinuous tendril.

"My uncle has told me," Yanko said, "that the mines are being scrutinized due to low production. That is why I was sent to monitor from within and help increase efficiency. We can't afford to lose any people, prisoners or otherwise, nor can we afford unscheduled rest breaks." He pointed at the mob. "Get back to work, all of you."

With the command issued, Yanko held his breath. What would he do if they didn't obey? His uncle hadn't granted him power over anyone and certainly hadn't told him anything about the mines. He would be in trouble later if word of his claims reached Mishnal.

The men muttered unhappily, but they backed away. Yanko exhaled slowly and let his illusion fade. He glanced at the Turgonian, wondering if the display would have him worried, since his people were superstitious about the Science. Dak had already returned to work, pushing a cart toward the tracks.

Yanko sighed wistfully. He didn't know why it mattered, but he had hoped for an acknowledgment from the Turgonian, at least a quick nod.

Two minutes ago you were fantasizing about his death. You don't deserve applause.

Wood creaked. The overseer had returned to his perch. He peered curiously down at the Turgonian for a moment, but started in with the drumbeat again without a word.

Part 3

Yanko walked into the practice chamber without enthusiasm. The Turgonian waited, his back to a wall, his sword and shield propped next to him. The overseer stood near the door, his features those of a bored man. Watching a teenager get thumped repeatedly must lose its allure after a while. So long as he was quick to react when Dak tried to crush Yanko's throat.

With that happy thought, Yanko chose the saber and *kyszar* and walked to the center of the room. The Turgonian stepped away from the wall, pointed at the short stabbing sword, shook his head, and pointed back at the rack.

"Uhm, what?" Yanko asked.

Dak repeated the series of gestures, shaking his head more firmly at the *kyszar*.

"You think I'd do better with something else?" Realizing the man wouldn't understand the question, Yanko returned the weapon to the rack and raised his brows.

The Turgonian nodded.

Yanko pointed at a shield.

Another head shake.

"Just the saber?" Yanko asked dubiously. Most Nurian fighting styles involved weapons in both hands. Admittedly, he wasn't that good with a blade in his left hand—thanks to his early aptitude with the mental sciences, he had learned to write long before he'd started training with weapons, and his right hand had always been dominate. He had long thought he might do better with a shield for blocking, but his great uncle and father had insisted on teaching him in the clan style.

Dak nodded and gestured for him to return to the center with only the saber. He faced the Turgonian who promptly gripped his shoulders and rotated him sideways. Having the big man so close made Yanko

nervous, but Dak soon finished his adjustments. After a series of gestures, Yanko got the gist.

“Oh,” he said, “this is the Turgonian dueling style, isn’t it? You keep your side to your opponent to present a smaller target and attack in and out that way, kind of in a line instead of circling each other? That’s not what your soldiers use in war, though, right? I mean, I know you have firearms, but you still train with swords and shields for unit combat, don’t you?”

The Turgonian stared at him. Oh, right. That’d been a rather complex question for a man who didn’t understand the language. Dak opened his mouth, as if he might say something, then glanced at the overseer who’d been observing this all without a change in expression. Dak shut his mouth and sighed.

“Sorry I don’t know any of your language,” Yanko said. “I learned Kyattese from my tutors, but they didn’t teach Turgonian. They probably don’t want us speaking to our enemies. If we knew how to invite each other to sit down for wine, we might get drunk and forget we’re supposed to be killing each other.”

The Turgonian snorted softly.

Huh, it had almost seemed like he’d understood that bit. Yanko studied his face, but the man didn’t give away anything else. Instead he returned to gesturing, pantomiming a series of attacks first with just his sword and then his sword and shield to demonstrate different fighting techniques.

“So... for one-on-one you’d use the dueling style, but in a platoon of men, you’d fight straight on with shield and sword, knowing you’ve got allies protecting your sides?” Yanko tried to gesture as well as he spoke, and the Turgonian gave a hand wiggle that seemed to mean, “Something like that.”

Dak picked up his sword, leaving the shield by the wall, and adopted a similar stance. This time, instead of simply smashing Yanko to the ground as soon as he could, he demonstrated the footwork, attacks, parries, and ripostes. When they started exchanging more earnest blows, he used repetition and a slower pace to allow Yanko

time to absorb the lessons. The Turgonian remained silent as they practiced, rarely doing more than changing the pitch of his grunts to indicate whether his pupil was doing something good or something idiotic, but Yanko found himself picking up the style quickly. He had never been the strongest boy in the village growing up, but he'd won a lot of foot races, and this suited his speed more than going toe-to-toe in a flurry of blade work. The footwork allowed him to dart in to attack with a combination of feints and lunges, then dart back out of range before Dak skewered him with his longer reach. Most of the time anyway. Sometimes even his speed wasn't enough, for the Turgonian was good at anticipating his attacks.

At one point, Dak pointed at his chest, extended his arm and his sword to show how far inside of his reach Yanko would have to come to hit the target, and then touched his hand, the one holding the blade, and lifted his eyebrows expectantly.

"Stab your hand?" Yanko guessed.

They had been resting, so he wasn't prepared when Dak's blade whipped up to prod his own hand. Yanko yelped and dropped his weapon. He scowled as warm blood trickled down his fingers.

The Turgonian didn't smile exactly, but the thinning of the lips was the closest he had come. He took a single step and demonstrated how easy it was to reach Yanko's chest with the blade unavailable for defense.

"I understand" Yanko said. "My people wouldn't consider that an honorable target, but I suppose if it's life or death, one can't be too picky." He wiped off his hand. "You wouldn't have needed to demonstrate so effectively."

Dak waved his own hand through the flame of one of the wall lamps.

"Yes, yes, the burned hand teaches best. We have that expression too." Yanko picked up his saber. He wouldn't complain further; after all, this session had been far less painful than the others, and for the first time, he felt a little hope that his skills might actually progress during these weeks in the mine, enough to satisfy his father.

A throat was cleared by the door. Yanko expected the supervisor, but his uncle had slipped in at some point.

“Honored Uncle,” he said warily, not certain how Mishnal would react to this new fighting style.

Uncle Mishnal waved Dak toward the exit with a few curt Turgonian words. As soon as he was gone, Mishnal asked, “Have you seen him doing anything suspicious?”

“Besides pummeling me into the ground?”

Uncle Mishnal squinted, not pleased with this sarcasm. “One of my men caught him speaking to other foreigners. It’s possible he plans to lead an uprising and escape.”

Yanko stopped himself from saying that would be understandable, and that he, too, had thought of escaping, if only for a time, to see the grass and the sky again. “I have not seen him often outside of this room.”

“Oh?” Mishnal’s tone grew cool. “I understand you assisted him with a problem yesterday.”

An itchy flush ran through Yanko’s flesh. *I’m in trouble... And my uncle knows that men are murdered down here, and he does nothing. You don’t know that; the overseer could have manipulated the truth.*

Yanko shrugged as casually as he could. “I did not think you would wish to lose men to internecine squabbles between the workers. He has the strength of a pack lizard. Surely that’s useful down here.”

“He killed ten soldiers before they got that collar on him,” Mishnal snapped. “The only reason he wasn’t strung and quartered is that he has some political significance, and there might be repercussions if he died that way.”

“I didn’t think we were having... repercussions with the Turgonians right now.”

“Don’t be naive, boy. Our greatest enemy from the war is sitting on their throne, or whatever they’re calling it now. Nobody knows what actions he will take, and even if he takes none... it will not be good for us. Not at all.” Mishnal gazed at the wall, a deep concern entering his

eyes. Somehow that worried Yanko more than his anger. Was there some threat on the horizon? Maybe he should have spent more time listening to his father's friends discuss politics instead of running off into the woods to befriend bears and convince truffles to grow again from earth long ago depleted of rich nutrients.

"The work here is dangerous," Mishnal said, drawing Yanko's attention again, "Everyone knows that. If he were to die in the mines, the Great Chief could not be blamed."

"I understand now, Uncle," Yanko said, though the idea of turning one's back so a man could be murdered upset him. Maybe he *was* naive. He had always thought—no, he'd always been *taught*—that honor was everything to his people. Honor in the way one responded to one's elders, in the way one interacted with friends and strangers, and honor in the way one treated one's enemies as well.

"I ask you again, have you seen him do anything suspicious?"

"I saw him speak a few words with another Turgonian yesterday," Yanko said. It sounded like his uncle had already heard as much so this admission didn't seem like a betrayal, though he wasn't sure if he should be worried about betraying this man or not. Yes, he felt more kindly toward Dak after the morning's training session, but would he be betraying his people if he kept silent when he knew something? What if, in choosing silence, he allowed an uprising that killed many of his uncle's workers?

"That's it?" Mishnal asked.

"Yes." Yanko was glad it was the truth. He wasn't old enough—didn't *know* enough—to decide which way to thrust the sword when lives balanced on the blade.

"Very well. You may skip the screw today. Return to your room and study your books. Make sure you can hurl a decent fireball. The admissions panel will not be amused if you choose to fling a swarm of bees at the enemy troops instead."

Yanko flushed. How many stories of his exploits had his father included in that letter to his uncle?

"And learn what you can in here." Mishnal pointed at the practice

chamber. "Your father is coming in three days with a guest. If you have not progressed suitably, you and I will both have to answer to him."

It had been less than two weeks. How much progress could Yanko be expected to have made? The Turgonian had spent the first week flattening him to the ground. And who could this guest be? Outside of the family, who could care about Yanko's progress?

The concern had returned to his uncle's eyes, and he mumbled to himself and shook his head as he walked away. Yanko rubbed his face, scarcely noticing that the wound on his hand hadn't scabbed over fully, and that he smeared blood on his cheek. More than ever, he wanted to take a run outdoors, out where nature ruled and man was only a visitor, but he had a feeling he wouldn't be allowed to flee to the sanctuaries of his youth any more.

Part 4

After breakfast, Yanko headed back toward the tiny office where Uncle Mishnal had directed him to study. The route took him toward the lift where Dak stood with a man in yellow and orange overseer's garb, though a heavier wool version as opposed to the usual silks. The overseer carried a lantern and a bucket of water. The Turgonian, too, wore heavy clothing, several layers of wool.

Yanko paused in the shadows between two lanterns, his hand pressed to the cool wall of salt. He couldn't help but wonder if he might have chanced across another attempt to make the troublesome Turgonian disappear. Dak held a long torch in one hand and a lantern in the other. The overseer stood placidly, his head bowed, his face a picture of concentration. Focusing on keeping his lone charge from running off? Dak's face seemed strained, his eyes tight, with the creases at the corners more lined than usual.

The lift arrived, and the bamboo gate opened. The Science that operated the machinery plucked at Yanko's senses, and in his mind he could see the cables in the shaft above and the artifact that hummed far below, providing the power that raised and lowered the device. As the overseer and his selected minion stepped inside, Yanko wished he could also sense where they were going.

It's none of your concern. If he dies down here, all the better. You had nothing to do with it, and there's no guilt on your conscience.

"No?" he murmured softly.

You need to study. Whoever this guest is, it's a foregone conclusion that you need to impress him. Not to mention that it'd be nice to have an approving nod from Father. It's been so long...

The voice in his head had a good point, and yet...

Yanko closed his eyes and imagined the shaft in his mind, the rickety bamboo lift descending into the depths, and the two living beings inside. He hadn't studied Seeing a great deal, but he was adept

enough to track their descent. It helped that the Turgonian wore a collar; to a sensitive mind, artifacts acted like a beacon in the darkness.

The lift traveled down and down, finally stopping on the lowest level in the mines. The uneasy feeling that had been building in him since he saw Dak with the overseer grew more intense.

Yanko called for the lift and hustled inside. He sent it to the lower level, and shivered, for the air seemed to grow cooler as he descended. An illusion—the temperature remained a constant in the mine—but he stuck his hands under his armpits nonetheless.

When the lift shuddered to a stop on the bottom shaft, more than two hundred meters below the surface of the earth, utter blackness awaited him. Staleness made the air smell thick and dangerous. The ventilation must not be as advanced down here, in this newly opened area. Despite this logical explanation, a thread of claustrophobia wrapped around Yanko's heart, the string tightening like a vice. He forced himself to step outside, into the darkness. The familiar sounds of the upper levels, the clinks of pickaxes and the beats of drums, were absent. Nor could he hear the voices or footsteps of Dak and the overseer. They had already disappeared into the darkness. Only the faint scent of burning pitch lingered in the air. They must have lit that long torch Dak had been carrying.

Yanko wished he knew what it was for. An image of the Turgonian funeral pyre entered his mind, as if the overseer had a bier waiting down here that he would insist Dak light, then lie upon.

Yanko could still sense Dak's collar—it had moved off down the single tunnel, and yes, there was the overseer, forcing the Turgonian to lead the way. Yanko thought about summoning a light of his own, a simple skill for a practitioner, but he hesitated. His instincts told him it would be best not to be discovered down here. He knew which way they had gone; he ought to be able to navigate through the darkness by sense.

With one hand on the wall for backup to the guidance his mind provided, Yanko started down the tunnel. He slipped on something

slick as soon as he started. A couple of puddles dampened the ground near the lift, and Yanko remembered the bucket. He couldn't imagine what the overseer was up to, but didn't spend time dwelling upon it. He didn't want to fall behind.

Sensing a route in the darkness and keeping track of the collar's aura taxed him in a way pushing at the screw and sparring with Dak never could. Sweat dripped from his chin and splashed onto his silk tunic. A headache blossomed behind his eyes. Irritated by his weakness—his father was right; he should spend more time practicing—he pressed on. Relief washed over him when the men stopped moving. He had a vague sense of a larger chamber than the tunnel they had been in. Some natural cavern?

Yanko hurried forward, wanting to close to within eyesight of the men so he wouldn't have to rely on the Science. If the overseer had a developed mind, he might grow aware of Yanko's manipulation of it. Many of those who weren't practitioners themselves were still Sensitives.

His foot struck something, and he lurched forward, almost tumbling to the ground. Yanko caught himself on the wall, but his concentration vanished, and he lost all sense of where he was and of those he was following. Fighting back the fear of being alone in utter darkness, he probed with his foot, searching for a route past the object that had stopped him. It stretched across most of the tunnel, though. Frowning, he turned his focus inward long enough to summon a ball of light. The others were still far enough ahead that they shouldn't see it.

Soft red light formed in the air above his head. It shed illumination on the tunnel, the wooden supports, and—Yanko cursed and stumbled backward, losing his concentration again. The light blinked out, plunging him into darkness. It didn't matter. He had already seen the two dead man sprawled on the ground.

He drew a steadying breath and formed the light again. His first thought was that the overseer and Dak had somehow been responsible for the deaths, but there wasn't any blood. From the way the men had fallen, it looked like they had been running back toward the lift, trying

to escape something.

Yanko picked his way past the bodies. He had gone farther down the tunnel and past two more men—this time the miners had been slumped against the wall, their pickaxes still in hand, when they died—before he realized what had happened. That realization brought him up short.

“Gas,” he mumbled. Methane—wasn’t that what sometimes gathered in the salt mine and killed workers? If Yanko had been there for more than a week, he would know for sure, but either way, he had heard of men dying because of poisonous air that could fill the passages.

He eyed the tunnel ahead, wondering if he risked more than lost time at his studies. Should he turn back?

A voice drifted to his ears. That of the overseer?

Yanko released his light and continued forward in the darkness, this time focusing his senses closer to him—he didn’t want to trip over any more bodies.

“In there,” came the overseer’s voice at the same time as the shaft turned and light came into view.

Yanko crept forward, careful to test each step and keep his footfalls silent.

A roar sounded, and a blaze of light surged from the tunnel ahead. Yanko squinted and lifted an arm to shield his eyes. He hadn’t seen such brilliance since he left the sun-drenched scrublands above. It faded quickly, the customary darkness returning. All of it. He swallowed. Had something happened to Dak and the overseer to extinguish their lanterns? Maybe they’d gone around a bend.

Nonetheless, Yanko hurried forward.

A soft rasp came to his ears, and he halted. It couldn’t be more than a few paces ahead. He hugged the wall, noticing the faint glow of a golden band. Dak’s collar. It would make a poor tool for illuminating one’s path in the night, but it was brighter than the surrounding blackness. Judging by the height, the Turgonian wasn’t sprawled on the ground, but he didn’t seem to be standing either.

Yanko almost called out, but if Dak had done something to the overseer... what would he do? He'd been on his way to study, and he didn't have any weapons with which to protect himself, nor had his uncle ever given him the mental key to control the collars. The lack of trust in that omission had bothered Yanko, but he hadn't questioned it.

He closed his eyes and stretched out with his senses, then picked up the auras of two men. The overseer was standing while Dak knelt. Yanko snorted inwardly. If he had relied on the Science instead of his eyes in the first place, he wouldn't have been worried. He wished he had been allowed to study at a preparatory mage school as a child so he'd know what amount of skill he should have at this age. His father had tried to find instructors for him, but learning from his cackling grandmother and the traveling gypsies... Yanko's tutorship had never been ideal. He feared he would struggle to pass those entrance exams.

A shower of sparks appeared, and the Turgonian soon had a lantern lit again. His and the overseer's faces came into view, grim in the deep shadows created by the flame.

"Light your torch again." The overseer pointed to the pitch-treated brand Dak still held. "There are more caverns that must be cleared."

Dak understood the gist and obeyed, though he gave his employer a speculative look before heading off into the next tunnel, his single eye narrowed. He had to wonder why he alone had been assigned this task. Yanko didn't know if it was common for one worker to clear the methane. Maybe less lives were in danger that way. Or maybe he had been singled out again as expendable.

When they came to another natural chamber, the overseer lingered in the mouth of the tunnel and waved the Turgonian into the space. Dak approached warily, his nose crinkled, and the torch extended as far above and in front of his body as his long arm would allow. Halfway into the chamber, the flames at the end of the torch flared from inches to meters. Dak ducked, dropping the brand. An inferno roiled across the arched ceiling, flames of blue and orange and yellow writhing in a deadly dance. Even though Yanko stood farther back in

the tunnel, light and heat blasted him. Dak hunkered on his knees and elbows, his arms protecting his head.

In that instant, Yanko understood the bucket. The men's heavy clothing had been drenched in water. The edge of the inferno buffeted Dak, and he would doubtlessly suffer heat burns, but the wool didn't catch fire.

The flames faded, leaving nothing but the dark stillness of the cave. The stench of methane seared Yanko's nostrils. He dared not sniffle, for he stood only a few paces behind the overseer, and the man had placed himself better this time so his lantern remained lit. For the first time, Yanko noticed one of his sleeves was singed. This was dangerous work for anyone in the area, overseer or not.

Dak climbed to his feet. When he turned to grab the brand, Yanko made out the redness of his face. He might have burns all over his body. The heat had to be intense out there.

Dak faced the overseer, his jaw set, and his visage particularly fierce. He looked like he wanted to yell, but he took a deep breath and spoke in a calm tone. He spoke a *lot*, pointing at the ceiling, then making gestures with his hands. Yanko wondered if the overseer understood—men who'd fought during the last major war and had encountered the Turgonians often knew some of the language, but this sounded like a complicated explanation.

The overseer shook his head and responded in Nurian, "I don't know half of what you're saying, gorilla, but we're not *building* anything. This is how it's done here. There's not enough metal left in the Great Land to spare for making machines for remote holes in the ground like this. If your people weren't so stingy with trade, we might have some iron, but we don't. Go. Relight your torch and move to the next chamber. We're almost to where they broke through to that vent."

Dak tried again, this time with more gestures. He definitely wanted to build something. Some contraption that might carry the torch forward ahead of the men? Yanko knew how to levitate an object. He ought to step forward and volunteer his help. Practitioners, like metal, were precious resources in Nuria, and it was unusual that one would

be sent to a mine, but as long as he was here...

Yes, but you're supposed to be studying. Your uncle won't be pleased if he learns you wandered down here.

Better his displeasure than the death of two men.

Yanko nodded to himself. He couldn't let these two risk their lives when he could avert some of the danger.

Dak had relit his brand, and he and the overseer had moved out of the chamber and into the next tunnel, one so new the wooden supports hadn't been added yet. Yanko strode after them, intending to make his presence known.

He'd stepped into the tunnel when light flared ahead again. His breath caught. They hadn't been prepared, had they? They were still in the—

A cry of surprise—and pain—erupted at the same time as the overseer cursed and started to shout something. A rumble sounded all around, and the ground trembled beneath Yanko's feet. He skittered backward and glimpsed the overseer and Turgonian running toward him, an inferno of yellow and orange framing them in the tunnel. Then the ceiling dropped in a great waterfall of rubble.

Heat and shrapnel blasted into Yanko, flinging him to the ground. Another rumble coursed through the mine, and he couldn't guess which way might be safe. He curled into a ball and protected his head. As more debris struck him, he tried to summon the concentration to generate a layer of dense air to cover his body, but with the earth shaking and his heart in his throat, he couldn't think about anything except praying to the swan goddess that she might lift her wings over him to protect him from the anger of the heavens.

But nothing more than the shrapnel hit him. The trembling ceased, and the mine quieted, with the darkness disturbed only by the trickle of dust.

Yanko lifted his head, then knelt back. He couldn't see a thing. His hands were shaking, but he managed to channel his concentration. A sphere of light appeared in the air. This time, he chose white, an intensity that would drive back the shadows.

Everything from boulders to fist-size pieces to granules of salt littered the floor in his chamber, but the ceiling remained in place. The tunnel...

Yanko stared. He'd been too slow to offer his assistance. The tunnel had collapsed.

He stumbled toward the rubble, wondering if there was a way either man could have survived.

"Hello?" he called.

At first, he didn't hear anything except his own soft breaths. Then weak scrapes drifted out of the debris.

"Dak? Honored overseer?"

The scrapes ceased. Yanko tried calling again and listened for muffled responses, but no sound penetrated the rubble. He leaned against the closest wall and let his light fade, so he could concentrate on sensing living beings. The rock wasn't a barrier to his mind, and he let out a soft sigh of relief when he detected first the Turgonian's aura and then that of the overseer's. They weren't beneath the rubble, but on the other side of it. The overseer's aura felt weak, and he seemed to be lying still. Unconscious? Dak was moving around. Doing what, Yanko couldn't tell. He wondered if the man would take this opportunity to get rid of the person who'd dragged him into this hole.

"I'll get you out," Yanko called. He didn't know if they could hear him, but thought good behavior might be more likely if Dak knew people were out here.

With his promise made, Yanko turned his focus to the rubble. "You were just about to show off your levitation skills," he muttered. With a brand, though, not with tons of salt boulders.

The method of levitation he had learned, one that complemented his tendency toward nature science, involved gathering a force of air and directing it into the space beneath an object. He would have to do that one rock at a time down here. He imagined there were mages somewhere with the power to more efficiently move the pile—perhaps the sort of thermal mage his father wished him to be could incinerate the rocks—but it was beyond him.

“I’ll get help,” Yanko amended his promise. They might have a limited air supply over there, especially if more methane was seeping from a vent. More people would make the task faster.

He had taken his first step toward the lift when a second boom rattled the mine.

He spun around, gawking. He only had a stunned heartbeat to wonder what in the heavens they were doing—they couldn’t have been foolish enough to light a lamp in an enclosed pocket, surely—before rocks flew out of the tunnel. *Large* rocks.

Yanko sprinted for the safety of the tunnel on the far side of the chamber. A boulder glanced off his shoulder, spinning him about. He stumbled into a wall. Salt dust filled the air, and his eyes filled with tears. He feared he’d be pummeled to death, but nothing else slammed into him. The clatter of falling rocks faded.

After a moment, Yanko found the wherewithal to summon his light sphere again. It highlighted more rubble in the chamber, some of the piles waist high, and also...

The bedraggled figure that walked out of the tunnel reminded him of a bear. Head bowed, his clothing reduced to rags, his face caked in soot, blood dripping from his chin, the Turgonian carried the overseer over his shoulder.

Dak halted, his eye widening when he saw Yanko and the light.

Yanko was certain his own eyes were wide as well. “What did you... How did you...” He shrugged helplessly and waved toward the tunnel that, while not rubble-free, had been cleared sufficiently to walk through.

Dak didn’t bother looking back. He pointed at his burden, and Yanko flushed in embarrassment. Yes, his first concern should have been inquiring after the man’s health and seeing if he could help. Blood darkened one side of the overseer’s thick robe, and dripped from his fingers as well.

“Do you have healing skills?” the Turgonian asked in Nurian.

Yanko stared at him. Dak had an accent, but his sentence structure and pronunciation were correct, and Yanko had no trouble

understanding him. And did that mean the Turgonian had no trouble understanding *him*? And had all along? He stumbled forward, knowing he had to help with the overseer, but this new revelation stunned him almost as much as the cave-in had. Not only did Dak speak Nurian, but he had a grasp on what could be done with the “magic” his people were so superstitious about.

Though Yanko’s mind reeled, he managed a vaguely intelligent response. “Rudimentary. I’m not... I haven’t had a lot of formal training.”

The Turgonian gazed wordlessly at him. Yanko wished he hadn’t admitted to his shortcomings. Was Dak even now wondering if Yanko could control the collar? Did he know that there’d be nothing keeping him from taking the lift to the top? There were security guards in the mines, but rarely in the small shack up above. It would be a simple matter for Uncle Mishnal to call out a force and track Dak down via his collar—and punish him for his wayward actions—but maybe a Turgonian warrior would feel compelled to try anyway.

“We specialize in certain areas,” Yanko said, wondering if it was too late to correct the impression of weakness he must have given. “I’m better at healing trees.” Erg, that sounded idiotic, but this wasn’t the time to explain the various blights and arboreal fungi that had threatened Nuria’s orchards with increasing regularity this century.

“I would hope the trees are wise enough to remain in the forest instead of venturing into methane-filled mines,” Dak said.

“I, uh. Usually.”

Wolf’s fangs, it wasn’t just that he spoke a few phrases of Nurian; he had full command over the language.

Yanko touched the overseer and tried to assess his wounds, but he had trouble focusing his mind with the Turgonian watching him. And judging him perhaps?

“A concussion and broken ribs,” Yanko managed after a moment. Assessing was far easier than treating. “Let’s get him up to the first level. There’s a doctor who’ll have more experience than I do.”

Dak nodded toward the tunnel. “Light the way.”

Yanko sent his illumination orb ahead, and they headed down the tunnel in single file.

“You haven’t let anyone else know you speak Nurian, have you?” Yanko was trying to remember if he had said anything insulting or self-condemning around his “training partner.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Dak said something in Turgonian, his singsong tone suggesting the recitation of some oft-repeated poem or saying. Dak switched to Nurian, “I think the comparable platitude in your language has something to do with foxes, dogs, and chicken coops.”

“The coop built with the fat hound in mind will not keep out the starving fox,” Yanko said.

They were nearing the lift, and Dak didn’t respond. He didn’t need to. He had just admitted to playing dumb so his captors would underestimate him. The gods knew he looked the part of a mindless thug, with all that brawn and that missing eye. So, what was he, really? Mishnal had mentioned diplomatic importance. Was he a high-ranking officer? More? And why was he being this open with Yanko?

Because he’s planning to kill you?

More likely he doesn’t see you as a threat...

“My uncle believes you’re plotting something,” Yanko said, wincing because his voice sounded petulant.

“Everyone down here is plotting something,” Dak said.

True. The peasants made up about a third of the work force, and they were the only voluntary miners. The rest would happily escape if given the opportunity.

“How did you blow up the tunnel without blowing yourselves up?” Yanko asked.

A clank sounded in the lift shaft, and he didn’t get a response. The bamboo cage appeared, clunking as it landed on this bottommost level, then the gate flew open. Men in the orange and red robes of security rushed out, crossbows in their hands. Dak halted, and Yanko stopped in front of him, a hand raised. With the overseer’s body

draped over his shoulder, nobody should have shot him anyway, but the guards appeared nervous. Twitchy.

“Yanko,” came Uncle Mishnal’s cool voice from the lift. He stepped out, wearing a frown. “You are not at your studies.”

“No, I—”

“I suggest you return to them now. Your father will be here soon.”

It crossed Yanko’s mind to defy his uncle, but two of the guards had lowered their weapons to take the overseer from Dak. They stepped into the lift. Though the remaining guards kept their bows up, nobody looked like they were planning to skewer a Turgonian. Since the men were waiting for Yanko to enter the lift before taking the overseer up, he sighed and stepped inside. It would be shameful to delay the fellow’s medical attention. He would have time later to find out more about this strange Turgonian—and to decide if he should mention Dak’s linguistic skills to his uncle.

Part 5

Yanko wiped his hands on his trousers for the forty-seventh time. He stood in the tunnel outside of the weapons training room, waiting as his uncle had directed. Murmurs drifted from within, the sounds of several voices. Yanko recognized his father's among them. He couldn't make out many of the words though.

Every now and then, a handful of perspiring workers walked toward the lifts, fresh from the lower levels, with sacks of salt balanced on their shoulders. None of them did more than glance into the training room. Whoever had come to visit, it meant nothing to them. Yanko, however, bounced on his toes, tempted to sneak forward and peek around the corner.

A new figure walked in from the direction of the deeper mines. Dak. He was dressed only in his faded wool trousers and boots, leaving his chest bare. It held scars as garish as the one that had taken his eye, along with racks of muscles that made Yanko feel like a prepubescent boy in comparison. Though he wore his collar, four guards walked behind Dak, each with a crossbow. An overseer—not the one who'd been injured—walked behind. Uncle Mishnal wasn't taking chances, not with an important guest in the mine.

Yanko tilted his head curiously, wondering if Dak had fully recovered from the methane ordeal. He wondered, too, if he had any idea who today's guest might be. Or if he cared. The Turgonian didn't offer a response to this look of inquiry.

"Stop," one of the guards said, and Dak halted several paces down the tunnel on the other side of the door.

Looks like I get to demonstrate my sword-fighting skills for Father and his friend.

Yanko supposed it was too much to hope that Dak would make him look good, or at least not entirely inept.

"Enter," came Uncle Mishnal's voice.

Yanko hesitated, not positive the command was meant for him or the Turgonian. Dak didn't move, however, nor did the guards push him forward. Yanko straightened his back and told the ants dancing in his stomach to run off. When he stepped inside and saw the people waiting, he kept his step from faltering, but barely.

His uncle was there, of course, though wearing gold and silver robes instead of his usual overseer oranges. Yanko's father stood next to him, clad in green and blue silks with his craggy, humorless features unchanged since Yanko had seen him last. The relatives were expected, the fierce warriors in the deep purples reserved for the Great Chief, his kin, and his entourage... were not. They stood along a wall behind a man in his early thirties who wore the accoutrements of a Nurian diplomat, a *rek rek* pipe and an intricately engraved Enigma Flute that radiated power to Yanko's sensitive mind. Yanko had never seen the rare musical instrument outside of books, nor had he ever expected to; only those closely related to the Great Chief were allowed to use them.

The man with the flute smiled. "Good morning, Yanko."

Yanko almost pitched over sideways, partly because this relative of the Great Chief was addressing him by name, and partly because he was smiling when everyone else in the room was grimmer than a funeral.

"Good morning, honored... uhm..." Yanko glanced at his father.

"Prince Zirabo," Father growled under his breath, then blew out an irritated huff that made his long black mustachios quiver.

Erg, yes, he should have known that. The Great Chief's youngest son didn't appear in many wall murals, not the way the chief and the heir did, but the flute and the guards should have been clues enough.

Yet another failure, Yanko. Father will leave you in these mines forever...

He pressed his palms together before his chest and bowed his head. "Prince Zirabo. I am most honored to be in your presence. I apologize for my ignorance. It should have been apparent immediately from your Enigma Flute." He doubted he would win anyone's favor for

recognizing the instrument, but just in case... In truth, it would be fascinating to hear it played—according to the legends, the early models had been infused with power that could pacify ferocious animals. Yanko’s music teacher had implied the chiefs these days used them to pacify humans and sway votes. He supposed it wouldn’t be appropriate to ask a prince if he could play a melody to calm bees protecting their hive. Something about Zirabo’s easy smile made Yanko think he would be more amused than annoyed at the request, but Father and Uncle Mishnal were another matter.

“I’ve come to see you demonstrate your fighting and Science abilities,” the prince said.

“You—you’ve come to see *me*?” Yanko was so surprised he forgot honorifics... and to lower his voice so it didn’t squeak in that unmanly register. He cleared his throat and avoided his father’s eyes, though he could feel their glare from across the room. Why couldn’t he ever do anything right?

Because you always feel him watching... judging you.

His brother always said Father had been different before their mother left, and Yanko wished he could remember those days.

“Well.” Zirabo waved a hand as if he had been caught in some faux pas. “I came to check on the mine—salt is one of the few resources we have in plenty, and we’ll need more of it in the coming months so that we buy... supplies.” His smile vanished for a moment, and he shook his head. “I checked the outposts your father oversees in the mountains as well. While we were speaking, he mentioned that you’ll be applying for Stargrind.”

Yanko withheld a wince, feeling more pressure than ever to perform well. “Yes, honored Prince. In the fall.”

“I should like to see how you’re doing.” Zirabo smiled again.

The smile seemed genuine, but for some reason, Yanko didn’t quite believe the words that accompanied it. It made sense that someone might come out to check on the mines, but why send a prince to travel so far? And why would Zirabo—or *anyone*—care about some whelp who had yet to take his entrance exams? His family had been honored

once, working closely with the Great Chief's clan, but his mother's choices had changed everything. Yanko had expected his entire school career to be a non-event for anyone in the government, and that it would only be if he distinguished himself later on that he might earn some degree of honor back for the family.

"Yanko," Father said, another cool look suggesting this wasn't the time for gaping in thoughtful silence. Perhaps it appeared more as stupefied silence to the outside observer. "Gather your weapons and collect your opponent from the tunnel."

"Yes, Father."

Yanko grabbed his saber from the rack but hesitated with his hand over the *kyzar*. He liked the style the Turgonian had shown him, but a couple of days of practice didn't make him an expert. Also, what would Father think if he abandoned the techniques his great uncle had been teaching him for years?

Dak walked in, the guards trailing. His fierce one-eyed gaze raked the room, taking everyone in but lingering on no one, not even the prince. Either he didn't know the significance of the purple-clad warriors... or he did and wasn't intimidated. Zirabo blinked in surprise at the appearance of this bare-chested Turgonian, but he recovered his equanimity and stroked his flute thoughtfully. Wondering if he would need to tame the man to keep him from killing Yanko?

Yanko lowered his hand without picking up the *kyzar*. He would do this the new way, punishment and disapproving glares be damned. Maybe he would even perform well. He thought about trying to catch Dak's eye with an imploring please-help-me-perform-well look but strode to the center of the room instead. No, he wouldn't ask for lenience in any manner. What he knew, he knew. Let these people judge him as they saw fit.

Dak chose his usual dual-edged sword and shield. He joined Yanko in the center of the chamber, facing him as they had done all the previous times, ignoring the guards surrounding him. Uncle Mishnal shifted from foot to foot. Did he think the prince might be in danger? Or did he think Dak would attempt to kill Yanko and that he must be

prepared to send commands to the collar?

After seeing Dak carry the injured overseer out of the mine, Yanko doubted he was in danger of dying in this practice arena. He wouldn't assume the Turgonian to be an ally either, but had the feeling he was the sort of man to kill face-to-face on the field of battle and not in some inappropriate setting. Of course, if he found his opportunity to escape, these mines could very well *become* a field of battle in his eyes.

"Both combatants are prepared?" Uncle Mishnal asked.

Yanko nodded. Dak didn't give an indication that he understood. At some point, Yanko might have to inform the others that he *could* understand, but it didn't matter now.

"Begin," Mishnal barked, then stepped back.

Without hesitation, Yanko lowered into the side-facing-front combat stance and bounced lightly on his toes, ready to spring back. After their previous encounters, he expected Dak to charge immediately, to attempt to barrel him to the ground again, but the Turgonian merely lowered into a combat stance as well, his torso guarded by the shield, the sword loose and ready.

This was more what Yanko had expected with their first encounter. They traded a few experimental blows, simple combinations of feints and attacks designed to test one's opponent. Dak had to know all about him by now—Yanko wished he could say the same for the Turgonian—so this must be for the sake of their observers. Interesting.

After the opening blows, Dak picked up his speed and his aggressiveness, throwing out combinations of maneuvers in quick succession rather than allowing Yanko a turn to attack. A barrage of slashes angled toward his head, and he found himself backing around the room, a fast-paced dance where the lead belonged to another. If he wanted a turn, he would have to find a way to take it. By focusing on evading the blows and providing a smaller target than he had been when he'd been parrying with the off blade, he felt less frenzied—that he had more time to think. He hadn't been struck yet, but he hadn't come close to striking his opponent either, and watching him retreat around the room couldn't be impressing his father.

Unlike Great Uncle and others that Yanko had sparred with, the Turgonian didn't offer up predictable patterns of combinations he liked to repeat. He *did* use the shield to cover the blind spot that his missing left eye gave him. He held the weapon higher and tighter than another might.

On a whim, Yanko ducked an attack and darted toward Dak's left, as if he meant to come in behind the shield and strike at the back. As the Turgonian moved to compensate, Yanko lunged back around to the man's right. Dak wasn't quite as fast, but he sensed the switch before he saw it, and whipped his blade back over to protect his chest. Remembering the lesson of the cut hand, Yanko slashed his saber toward Dak's calf. Not a vital target, but the opportunity to make contact excited him nonetheless. With the blunt practice blades, it probably wouldn't even draw blood, but maybe it would give the Turgonian pause.

Dak was faster than a man that size had a right to be and lifted the leg a split second before the saber struck his flesh. Yanko held back a groan. *Don't give up; you have the advantage.* The maneuver left Dak off balance and backpedaling to recover. Yanko pressed him, advancing, feinting, and lunging, taking the offensive for once. Dak retreated, but his momentary falter had already passed, and he parried each blow with the experience of years Yanko just didn't have.

You've got to do more than beat at him and hope, fool. Set something up. Create an opening.

Already the fury of the pace was winding him, but he tried to take his own advice. He bent his knees and thrust off his back foot for a deep, low lunge, targeting Dak's legs again, the inside of a shin this time. As a tall man, Dak must find the low strikes more irritating to defend against than the ones at a comfortable level. While the Turgonian was concentrating on the low attack, Yanko ran to the man's left again, rounding the shield. This time he didn't make it a feint. He threw all his effort into trying to get in behind Dak to strike at his back. Again, as with the calf, he saw the opening and lunged. But once again, he huffed in frustration because his opponent was too

quick and recovered in time, or maybe he had read his intent from the beginning. Or both.

Dak drove him backward with a series of attacks of his own, and when they had some distance between them, they both paused by some unspoken agreement. Sweat ran down Yanko's back, and his breaths came like the pants of a dog. His only satisfaction was that sweat dripped down the Turgonian's torso as well, and he'd come far closer to hitting the man than he had in their previous sessions.

"Enough," Uncle Mishnal said. "Lower your weapons."

Yanko lowered his saber but didn't take his eyes from Dak, not right away. He was not positive where he stood with the man. Would he view those near misses with anger and be reluctant to stop the fight until he had ground Yanko into the floor again?

No. He inclined his head and walked to the rack where he deposited the sword and shield. He clasped his hands behind his back and faced the room in such a way that nobody could get behind him.

Yanko looked to his father, wondering if his own display had been... satisfactory. Uncle Mishnal gave him a slight nod. He had seen Yanko's first encounter with the Turgonian and could compare. That faint approval satisfied Yanko, but his father didn't meet his eyes. He was looking at the prince, concern on his face.

He doesn't think I was good enough.

The tip of Yanko's saber drooped to touch the ground. Father was more concerned with the prince's reaction than with anything else. And the prince... To say he appeared bored wouldn't quite be fair, but he did look... distracted. He was eyeing Dak. Dak in turn remained in his military rest stance, his face cool, his focus on a spot on the wall above the wolf god's statue across the chamber.

Yanko walked past the guards and returned his saber to the rack.

Zirabo shifted his attention to him and smiled again. "You can't ask for a better practice partner than a Turgonian, can you? Their close combat skills haven't diminished in the centuries since they've started shooting at us with rifles."

"Yes, honored Prince. I find him a challenging opponent." Yanko

was relieved when his uncle didn't snort. *Challenging* was perhaps an insufficient term to describe those early encounters with Dak.

"Indeed," Zirabo said. "Your father mentioned that you've been studying the Science as well, and that you might be persuaded to give us a demonstration."

Fireball time. After seeing the infernos of burning methane, he was less enthused than usual at handling such a force, but it was what they would expect, what everyone who wanted to become a combat mage studied these days. Yanko wiped his hands on his shirt, an ineffective gesture given how much he had sweated during that sparring match—his shirt was as damp as the rest of him.

"Yes, honored Prince."

"Good." Zirabo picked up a satchel and opened the flap. He pulled out a small potted fern, its leaves drooping and brown. Most people would have called it dead. They wouldn't have been far off.

"I picked it up before I started into the mountains," Zirabo said. "The climate is a touch dry on this side of the ridge, and it doesn't seem to be doing well."

"Er," Yanko said. "It would have been smarter to remove it from its home during a dormant growth period. And to have not then... stuffed it in a bag."

Father cleared his throat.

"Honored Prince," Yanko added.

"Yes, I suppose that's true." Zirabo walked over and set the pot down on the smooth salt floor. "Do you think you could do anything for it?"

Oh. This was a test. And not the test Yanko had expected. Had Father said something about his preference for nature science? It didn't seem like he would—there weren't any warrior mages with that specialty, nor were there many men who favored earth studies to fire these days—but how else could Zirabo have known? And why would he care to ask after some plant?

"You can do it," Father said, perhaps mistaking his hesitation for uncertainty.

Now, he urges me. After all the times he's asked me to study something else.

Aware of the dozen pairs of eyes watching him—not to mention the single eye of the Turgonian—Yanko sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the bedraggled fern. He rested his hand on the side of the pot and closed his eyes as he had so often done in the forest as a boy. He sensed the disrupted soil, the dryness of the root system, the hunger of the fronds for the sun's energy. Up above, he would have more access to nutrients that could be found in the earth—the salt offered very little the plant needed. But perhaps some little progress could be made here. An illusion would certainly not fool the prince, not when he had studied the Science himself.

Yanko summoned a ball of light, choosing a radiation that matched that of the sun's as closely as he could. Next, he drew water from the humidity of the air and bypassed the roots to infuse the microscopic droplets directly into the fern's cell walls. Dehydration was the plant's most grievous injury. He accelerated its uptake and processing of the light as well. He wasn't sure how long he sat there, but when he opened his eyes, the withered brown fronds had taken on a green hue. It would take some time for the fern to regain its health, but with a regular supply of water and perhaps some compost to enrich the poor soil in the pot, it could survive. He allowed a pleased smile to stretch across his face before remembering his audience.

The guards wore bored expressions, both Dak's men and the purple-clad fellows accompanying the prince. Well, fireballs *were* more exciting to observers, Yanko supposed. Uncle Mishnal was scratching his head. Father was tugging at his mustachios and eyeing the prince, apparently as perplexed as Yanko as to this choice of test. With his hands still clasped behind his back, Dak hadn't shifted his stance an inch, but his brow seemed less lined than usual, his face thoughtful rather than grim.

"Nicely done," Zirabo said, wearing the same smile. Yanko was beginning to suspect that smile was part of his diplomatic veneer and might not give a true indication of his thoughts, but his tone held a

warmth that Yanko rarely received. He allowed himself to feel pleased anew and smiled back, though he kept the gesture slight and modest, as Grandfather had always encouraged.

“If I may presume,” Yanko said, keeping his eyes downcast and his voice soft, “the honored prince may wish to leave the pot in his wagon where it can receive light. And assign someone to water it.”

“I’m sure one of my men will be most pleased to do so,” Zirabo, lips quirked up in a smile more wry than diplomatic, eyed the large, muscular, and most certainly skilled warrior guards. They all nodded to him, then, before the prince’s face had turned away, started pointing at each other and silently trying to foist the task off on the nearest comrade. This brazenness surprised Yanko, and he decided Zirabo must not only be lenient with his men but that perhaps they’d also gone into war together. Yanko had often heard of the bonds men formed in dire situations of forced closeness. Though Yanko still struggled to see himself marching into battle, he did feel a wistful pang at the notion of having such comrades. These last weeks in the mine with no one his own age to talk to, nor even his hounds to hike into the forest with, had been particularly lonely.

Zirabo picked up the pot. “Any other suggestions for furthering its health?”

Yanko was surprised the prince bothered asking. He couldn’t truly care about this plant beyond the bounds of this test, could he? Perhaps it was simply his diplomatic side that urged him to make all around him feel at ease.

“A bigger pot if you’re going to keep it long,” Yanko suggested. “And better soil. If you’re going back across the ridge with my father, and you have time to stop in our village, you could see my cousin Ishee. She promised she’d take care of my bees and my worms.”

“Your *worms*?” Zirabo asked even as Father covered his brow with his hand.

Yanko cleared his throat, reminded of the elders who’d pointed out that some of his hobbies were more appropriate for geriatric women than boys. “Yes, honored Prince. I made some boxes, homes for them

if you will, and feed them the spoiled vegetables and table scraps. They produce wonderful rich castings—” he prayed thirteen-year-old Ishee would have the sense not to call it worm poop, as she so often did, to the Great Chief’s son, “—that are full of nutrients and can improve the overall health of the soil.”

“I see, I see,” Zirabo murmured, nodding to himself.

Yanko would have been happy to expound on the subject but feared his rambling might not be appreciated by everyone present. Indeed, the amusement on the guards’ faces had grown a touch dry, as they perhaps wondered which of them might be assigned to gathering worm castings.

Zirabo clapped once and spread his hands. “A good showing, young man, thank you. You must be tired from your physical and mental exertions.” He touched his flute. “Shall I play a tune to alleviate your weariness?”

“It would be magnificent to hear you play,” Yanko said.

“Honored Prince.” Father stepped forward. “This is a great blessing you offer us. Would you perhaps wish some refreshments before beginning? Or a greater stage from which to be heard? This meager chamber hardly seems fitting.”

“I assure you, this will be fine, Gar Moon.” Zirabo lifted a hand to keep Father from running off to gather who knew what drinks or chairs or flower arrangements he thought necessary for such an event.

With obvious reluctance, Father bowed and subsided.

Zirabo lifted his flute on its leather cord but peered at Dak before bringing the instrument to his lips. Did he not think the Turgonian worthy of hearing his song?

“He is surely weary, too, honored Prince,” Yanko said before he could think wiser of speaking out. “As are all the miners, certainly. We would all appreciate your song, if it will carry.”

Father frowned at this presumptuousness, and Yanko knew he would receive a lecture later.

“Hm,” was all Zirabo said, resting his fingers lightly on the holes.

The first few notes were soft and drawn out, though they resonated

and seemed to linger in the air. Yanko had only had the few months of required music studies as a child, enough to accompany a singer or group with a drum if needed, but it was enough to identify the haunting tune as having a minor key. It wasn't what he would have expected from a melody meant to rejuvenate the body, but the music stirred the hairs on the back of his neck; he sensed the power within it, power that went beyond the simple appreciation of a song.

He had thought he'd already recovered from his sparring match, but a new freshness flowed into his limbs, invigorating him like stepping out into chilly mountain air first thing in the morning. He flexed his arms, ready to swing a sword or a pickaxe or whatever one might need. The power of the flute was thus that he could almost see the music flowing out of it, as if the notes were tangible strands, floating in the air, toward Father and Uncle Mishnal and toward the Turgonian as well.

Yanko paused, focusing his sensitivity. Something was different about the strands flowing toward Dak. Did the Turgonian sense it as well? Dak was watching the prince and standing statue still.

Surely, Zirabo hadn't been sent to complete the "accident" that Yanko had averted the other day. And if he had, what could Yanko do? This wasn't some uneducated gang of workers he could cow with illusions. This was someone who might have been sent by the Great Chief himself.

A few final notes played, and the music ended. Dak remained standing, his eye open. Yanko let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Whatever that had been, it hadn't killed Dak. At least not yet.

Your imagination, boy.

Dak coughed. It had been so long since he moved that it drew everyone's eyes. He thumped on his chest and coughed again, bending forward as he did so, grabbing the rack. His hand bumped a sword, knocking it to the ground.

Yanko took a step toward the prince. He had no right to question an elder, much less the Great Chief's son, but he couldn't stop himself

from blurting, “What did you do?”

Zirabo was merely watching the Turgonian with a raised eyebrow, as if he thought this some overly dramatic display. Dak coughed a couple more times, then lifted his hand, the closest thing to an apology Yanko had seen him issue. What was going on here?

“That was more delightful to hear, honored Prince,” Father said.
“Thank you for—”

Something rolled through the doorway.

A barrel. A burning fuse stuck out of a bunghole in one end, and it twirled with each revolution.

“Look out!” several of the guards barked.

“Prince Zirabo!”

The barrel was heading straight for Yanko. He sprinted for the wall where his father and uncle stood. “Down, down,” he barked, though they were already dropping to the ground.

Yanko threw his arms over their backs and hunkered on the floor with them. This time, he had a couple more seconds to prepare, and he managed to find the concentration to craft a shield, a small barrier of dense air to surround and protect them.

The barrel exploded. Even with his head buried and his eyes shut, the brilliant light burned red against his lids. This time, no shrapnel struck him, but he sensed the impacts against his shield. Wood, not rock. The chamber remained stable. Good.

Yelps of pain promised others hadn’t been so fortunate as he. Yanko dropped his shield, gave his father and uncle a quick pat to make sure they were unharmed, then leaped to his feet. Two of the guards in purple sprinted out of the room. The rest were trying to stand up, though they groped for the wall for support. Blood dribbled out of one man’s ear, and others had torn clothing.

The prince was missing.

So was Dak.

Part 6

One of the men who'd been guarding Dak wasn't moving, at least not quickly enough to do anything effective. Yanko grabbed his crossbow and sprinted into the tunnel. He had been worried about the prince attacking Dak, but he wagered the Turgonian had something to do with this, if not *everything*. If anything happened to Prince Zirabo... this would be Yanko's fault. Why hadn't he warned his uncle that the Turgonian was more than he seemed?

The purple-robed guards had sprinted to the left, deeper into the mine. Dak must have gone that way, yet...

Yanko gazed to the right, toward the lift that led to the surface. Surely that would be his ultimate destination. Only death awaited him if he remained in the mine.

Yanko jogged for the lift. With the angry shouts fading behind him, he tried not to feel as if he was running away.

The area around the lift was open with nothing for cover save for a couple of bags of salt abandoned by workers who must have scattered when they heard the explosion. Should he wait here for Dak? No, the bags weren't large enough for him to hide behind, and he wanted to make sure he had the advantage if he had to deal with the Turgonian, especially if the man carried a valuable prisoner.

Yanko stepped into the lift and ordered it to the surface. Far below, the creaky machine that powered the cables responded. Cool drafts brushed his cheeks, along with smells of the dry scrublands, the outdoors he hadn't seen for many days. It wasn't his forested homeland, but it was better than the lifeless passages of the mine. Another time, he would inhale deeply and appreciate it. Now? He stepped out of the lift, walked ten paces, and knelt behind a boulder.

Night owned the sagebrush and tumbleweeds dotting the dusty hillside, and a starry sky outlined the ridge high above. A guard shack hunkered by the mine entrance, many of the stones missing from its

walls and its roof in disrepair. Since the collars had been instituted, it hadn't been necessary to maintain a large security force.

So, what happened to Dak's collar, eh?

The prince couldn't have done something with that song, could he have? And if so, why?

Stop the Turgonian first; you can question him later.

Two lamps on poles burned next to the lift entrance. Anyone who came out that way would be outlined as soon as he stepped out of the cage. Yanko rested the crossbow on top of the boulder and scowled at his hands. They were shaking.

Because you're scared.

No, because he didn't want to shoot Dak.

Too bad—he attacked the chief's son.

Coyotes howled on the ridge above. For a moment, Yanko thought of stretching out to them with his mind. They were far away and busy on the trail of something, but perhaps he could convince them to join him, to harry Dak if he proved troublesome.

But soft clanks and the groan of the rising lift reached his ears. He touched his finger to the trigger. There was no time to summon help.

The bamboo cage rose into view, and the gate swung open. Dak strode out, a pickaxe in one hand and a sword in the other. Not a practice blade—one of the guard's sharp weapons. The darkness made it hard to tell, but Yanko thought the long blade appeared wet, with dark rivulets running toward the hilt...

He was debating between calling out and simply shooting when more men streamed out of the cage. Many more men. Ten. Ten hulking Turgonians. Some detached part of Yanko's mind registered surprise that so many men could *fit* in the lift at once.

It doesn't matter. One. Ten. You have to stop them.

And how was he supposed to do that?

Dak didn't give him time to figure it out. He started up the path at a jog.

"Halt," Yanko said before the Turgonians could close to melee range. He stood up, making sure Dak could see the crossbow.

A crossbow that can only take out one, at most.

Before the Turgonians pointed out that bit of logic, Yanko spoke again. “What did you do with the prince?”

Dak held up a hand, palm out. “He’s on the fourth level, tied to a pumping machine. They’ll find him.”

Or he could be dead. What truth did Dak owe him? “Why? Why did you take him?”

“It was meant as a distraction, nothing more. So we could escape.” Dak spread a hand toward his comrades. Some of them were muttering in their own tongue. Yanko might not understand the words, but the gestures toward him seemed explanatory. *What are we waiting for? We can flatten this kid.*

“That doesn’t explain why you disappeared with the prince,” Yanko said.

“He freed me.” Dak touched the collar at his neck, then lifted his other hand and pulled apart the back, something he never could have done with its usual energy locking it. He tossed it to the ground.

“What?” Yanko asked, though he was thinking again of the power of that song, the way he’d sensed it was doing something else for Dak, not simply rejuvenating him.

“I wasn’t expecting it—expecting him—but it worked perfectly,” Dak said. “Almost. He only intended to free me. Given the accidents that regularly happen involving foreigners, that was unacceptable.” He nodded toward his countrymen.

They were shifting about, eyeing the lift. Sooner or later, someone else would realize they had gone to the top. Yanko wondered if he should try to distract and delay them until the guards caught up.

“The prince volunteered to do this?” Yanko asked.

Dak hesitated. “I convinced him.” He gazed out on the dark scrublands. “For him even to help me, it was...”

“Treason?” Yanko suggested.

Dak’s chin rose. “I should never have been imprisoned. I was sent as a diplomat. Our treaties allow for the uninterrupted passage of official government diplomats between countries.”

Yanko had a hard time imagining Dak as a diplomat, or anything other than a soldier, but... Hadn't his uncle said that Dak was an inconvenient political prisoner? One who couldn't simply be executed? Maybe Prince Zirabo had come to right a wrong he believed the Great Chief had done. But... "And these others?"

The lift clanked. Someone was summoning it back below. Behind Dak, the Turgonians shifted again, fingering what weapons they had claimed during their escape. Interestingly, none of them ran off or tried to hurry Dak.

"I would not leave without them, not when I knew they had no hope of escape, nor would they likely survive the year." Dak took a step forward, toward Yanko.

"So you *convinced* the prince to break their collars too."

"Yes. I owe him... a great favor at some point. I hope to be in a position to redeem it eventually." Dak took another step.

Yanko fingered the trigger. "And do you intend to convince me to let you pass as well?"

The chief's son might get away with treason. Yanko would not.

"I hope I don't have to."

Another two steps, and Dak stopped in front of Yanko. The crossbow sight aimed squarely at his chest. Yanko's finger trembled on the trigger. If he shot Dak, the others would swarm over him and kill him. If he didn't, if he let these Turgonians escape into the night without a fight...

"Dak," one of the men whispered behind him. "The guards will be up here any second. Do you want more bloodshed with these people?"

"No," Dak said, looking into Yanko's eyes. "I don't."

He leaned his pickaxe against the boulder, lifted his hand slowly, and pushed the crossbow away from his chest. Yanko's finger had been so tight on the trigger, so tense, that the weapon went off before he knew it. The quarrel spun away into the darkness, far wide of hitting any of the Turgonians.

"I owe you a favor too," Dak murmured.

Yanko shook his head bleakly. He was committing treason; the last

thing he wanted was a reward for it.

“And I don’t expect you to forgive me for this,” Dak said, stepping past him.

Forgive him? It was Yanko who was at fault.

Only when something slammed into the back of his head did the words make sense. Pain erupted in Yanko’s skull, and the world went dark.

Epilogue

Yanko woke in a bed, the familiar grayish-white salt ceiling above him. His first thought was of disappointment, to be back in the cold stale air of the mine again. His second thought was of pain. He winced, lifting a hand to probe at a tender egg-sized lump on the back of his head.

“I wouldn’t touch it,” came a voice from the next bed over.

Only then did Yanko realize he was on the first level, in the small infirmary.

“Turgonians are brutally efficient when it comes to damaging heads, torsos, and other body parts one would prefer not be maimed.”

Yanko’s vision hadn’t cleared entirely, and it took him a moment to identify his roommate. He swallowed. Prince Zirabo.

A lamp burned on a table between the beds, revealing black-and-blue marks on his face, along with a lump at his temple that matched the one on Yanko’s head.

“You tried...” Yanko hesitated and checked the rest of the room to see if anyone else lingered. They were alone. “You tried to help him.” Yanko left unspoken, *And this is how he repays you. Us.*

The prince nodded. He understood. “Something nobody knows, and I’ll implore you to keep it that way. They found me beaten and tied. They found you unconscious. It was obvious to them that we’d tried to stop the Turgonians and understandably failed against superior numbers.” Zirabo gazed solemnly into Yanko’s eyes.

“Oh,” Yanko said.

He had committed treason, by omission or failing to act, if not by outright sabotage, but nobody except the prince knew he had. Even the prince must only suspect. He had no proof. After all, what could a single inexperienced youth do against a squad of escaping soldiers?

“As a child,” Yanko said quietly, “I often wished I was better at getting away with things, but Father or Aunt Min always caught me. I

never thought I'd find the idea of succeeding in getting away with something distasteful." He plucked at the blanket draped across his torso. "Dishonorable." He muttered the last word to himself. He didn't wholly understand the prince's relationship with Dak and did not wish to seem to condemn him.

But Zirabo must have heard for he nodded and hummed. "Sometimes... honor is a matter of yes or no, light or dark, but more often, we must navigate the shadows in between. It is taught that loyalty to one's family and one's country is of paramount importance, but for some people, a day comes when you realize that those who live beyond your borders and have different tongues and beliefs are as human and as deserving of loyalty as your own people.

Yanko leaned his head back against the pillow. "I'm not sure I'm old enough to judge that properly."

"You haven't much time left to be a child, I fear. The future... well, perhaps it is a ways off yet. There is still hope the inevitable might be averted."

Yanko faced the prince. "What does everyone think is coming? War with Turgonia?"

"No, nobody wants to go to war with Fleet Admiral Starcrest, now *President* Starcrest. Some believe he'll take the military might of the empire, the former empire, and attack, but more believe he wants exactly what he claims, an era of peace and stability for Turgonia. But stability over there means... fewer opportunities for us to acquire the resources we need. I had hopes to find a diplomatic solution, an opportunity that would allow us to exchange salt and Made devices for their ore and crops, but when my father starts hurling their delegates into mines... it doesn't bode well for peaceful trade."

"Why do we need their resources and crops?" Yanko asked.

Zirabo met his eyes. "The Great Land is where agriculture first developed, thousands of years ago, where humans first flourished. Our history is amazing, but we've grown and grown, and have more people than ever, and the land, as you must have learned, is less fertile than ever. A thousand generations of farmers have depleted the earth of its

nutrients, and our crop yields are lower than ever, even in years we don't suffer droughts or storms. The aquifers from which our wells draw water to irrigate the fields are being depleted too fast to be replenished. We have too many people and too little food to sustain ourselves without expansion, and there aren't many places left to expand to, not without war. We must either find a way to feed more with less... or to cull the herd."

A tremble went through Yanko's belly. "Is someone... thinking of doing that?"

"Not in a systematic manner, but nature has a way of taking care of these things. In the face of such a future, war seems inevitable."

"War amongst our own people?"

"It seems likely."

The prince's words about navigating the shadows suddenly seemed to apply to far more than a few Turgonian prisoners.

"But perhaps someone will find a less bloody solution." Zirabo smiled at him.

He can't mean... Me?

"I thought... I mean, I realize now that you must have come here because of the Turgonian, not because of me. Or the salt."

"That is true, though I was intrigued by what your father said about you as we rode over, or rather what he seemed to be trying hard *not* to say. You prefer creating to destroying. That is a rare trait in a young man, especially one training to be a warrior mage."

"That's... well, it was always understood that I would aspire to that career." Yanko decided it wouldn't be appropriate to ask the prince to intervene and find him a new destiny, one that could somehow still help his family regain its status. After all, it sounded like Zirabo might be on the bottom rung in his family too. Yanko did allow himself the small complaint of, "Father... doesn't appreciate my creating."

"We are not always blessed with fathers who understand us." The prince's smile grew very dry.

"Is your father..." Yanko reminded himself that he was talking about the Great Chief here. It wouldn't do to think of Zirabo as a

comrade or peer, even if they had been pulverized by the same Turgonians. Curiosity overrode his tongue's hesitation. "Is he the one who ordered Dak imprisoned here?"

"He is. I was not in the Golden City then. He's frustrated with the way events came to pass in Turgonia, that we weren't able to find a way to gain access to their rich mineral resources. He had no wish to listen to the words of their latest diplomat."

"Dak was truly a diplomat then? Not a soldier?"

"In Turgonia, the two careers are not mutually exclusive."

"Still, he didn't seem very..." Yanko rubbed the scab on his hand. "Diplomatic."

"No," Zirabo agreed.

Yanko thought he might say more—he certainly seemed to *know* more—but the prince fell silent.

"Do you know if my uncle sent men after the Turgonians?"

"They did," Zirabo said.

"Do you think they'll catch the Turgonians?"

"No."

"Why do I sense that you know a lot more about this Turgonian diplomat than you're telling me?" Yanko asked.

Zirabo smiled. "Because you're a perceptive youth."

"I appreciate the compliment, but I'd rather know the full story."

"My *father* doesn't even know who he is. If he did, his fate might have been far worse than the mines." Zirabo shook his head. "While he's still on Nurian land, I won't speak his name."

"He said... he owes me a favor. Do you think that means anything?" Yanko figured the Turgonian would head straight for home. What were the odds that they would ever meet again?

"Yes," Zirabo said, a faint smile still curving his lips.