

From the Circle House

Chapter 1

Ribas finished the service in the Circle House and stood in the doorway as old men and women, and their young children and grandchildren, filed past him into the mint-smelling summer evening. Ribas's five-year-old nephew Raulin stopped to shake his uncle's hand the way the grown men did, but his sister Nita, only three, wrapped her arms around her uncle's leg and refused to budge until Ribas scooped her up and dropped a kiss on her forehead. Her father Gedrin scolded the girl, telling her to behave like a grown-up lady for once. Nita shook her wheat-colored curls out of her face and gave her father a saucy look from the safety of her uncle's arms. Ribas tried not to laugh as he handed his charge over to his brother, quieting his niece's protests – "but uncle Ribé, I want you to come home with us, Da doesn't tell good stories like you do" – with the reminder that it was bedtime, he'd see her tomorrow.

When the Circle House was empty, Ribas went back inside to make sure he had enough water and salt left for the morning rites, and to gather up the round polished stones from the woven prayer baskets by each of the House's six windows. He put the prayer stones back together in the big basket by the Hearthstone, which faced northwest, toward the place where the goddess Kenavi had lived when she was a human woman. The Hearthstone had an empty place in its center, directly above the Hearth itself where the fires were built in autumn and winter. Ribas had looked at that empty place, where the heart of the Circle House should have been, countless times over the years. Each time he saw it, he felt an ache as if something in his own body had gone missing.

Tonight, as he always did before he blew out the candles in the House, he ran his hand over the rough stone wall by the Hearth in a goodnight salute. Strange to think he had served here as

zhinin for almost twenty years. You never knew what life would bring you. He kept his hand against the stone, still cool at the end of a long summer day, for another moment before he blew out the candles and went outside.

A stranger was waiting for him in the yard. Ribas knew everyone in Lida village on sight, and most of the people from the nearby villages too, but he didn't recognize this man. Even in the dim light, Ribas could see that the stranger's shirt had the soft sheen of silk, and his breeches seemed to be made of heavy linen, expensive stuff. His leather vest had an ornate pattern of stitching around the collar and arm holes. Ribas noticed the film of dust on that vest and the mud spattered on the man's leather shoes and around the bottoms of his breeches. So he'd had a journey getting here, but had most likely ridden; no one with clothes like these would walk. Ribas pulled the Circle House's heavy wooden door shut behind him and asked, "What can I do for you?"

The man looked him up and down. He had to be at least a dozen years younger than Ribas, more of a boy really, seventeen or eighteen at most, but he stood eye to eye with him. Ribas wondered if he had come to Lida looking for help from the zhinin. Plenty of people did that. The zhinine, like Ribas and old Odilas before him, might be inferior priests compared to a high-and-mighty kunin, but in Lida and the other farm villages, no one sniffed at the one choice they had when it came to seeking help for disorders of mind, body or circumstances. No kunin had bothered to come to a place like Lida for years, or ever would again, as far as Ribas could imagine. Not after what had happened here a generation ago.

The boy's once-over of Ribas didn't seem to impress him. He asked, looking down his rather long nose, "Are you the zhinin here?"

If his clothes hadn't marked him as a city-dweller, his voice would have. It didn't have the rich roundness you heard from the farm people, but it didn't have the flat patrician twang of the upper class either. Ribas swallowed a smile. He'd heard that kind of voice before, in his younger days

when he had spent time traveling in Namora and even Lassar. You only got it in cities, and the face it came out of usually looked young but pinched and always hovered above a held-out palm. Ribas had put any number of tanai, small silver coins, into those palms. Fine clothes or not, this boy here in front of him had started life as a city rat.

He answered, "Yes, I'm the zhinin."

"Really."

The boy's tone dripped with disbelief. Ribas forgave the arrogance, but he was glad that Maryut hadn't come with him to service tonight. No real wife could have been half as protective as she was. If she had been here now, this boy would have been choking on his own tongue and probably trying to unknot his legs from around his neck. Maryut always said that Ribas shouldn't just wear a shirt and breeches for services, he should put on the sea-blue robes he was supposed to wear, but he almost never did. After all, everyone already knew who he was.

He turned his back on the boy, to make it clear he didn't answer to arrogant whippersnappers, and set the latch on the House's door. It had needed a new latch for years. Every morning and evening after services, Ribas forced the squealing metal bar into place, only to have to wrench it out again a few hours later. He could easily have gone to the blacksmith and asked him to make a new one, but like Zhinin Odilas before him, he kept the old one because it was the only piece they had left of Lida's original Circle House.

He finished setting it and rubbed the orange rust off his hands onto his breeches. Looking the boy in the eye, he said, "You won't find any other zhinin here. Now do you have business with me, or should I be on my way?"

The boy's pale Adam's apple jumped as he gulped. He pulled himself together and held out a scroll, rolled up and tied shut with a leather thong. "This is for you."

A messenger? Ribas realized he should have thought of that, but the boy didn't look like it, in those fine clothes. Letters were few and far between, especially in the farm villages where people worried more about cycles of cheese-making and crop-sowing than about reading and writing. Ribas wondered what it could be about. Before he could take the scroll, though, the boy pulled it away again and asked, "Can you read?"

That shaft did hit home. Ribas knew that some people thought that Lida didn't deserve any kind of real priest. Their rebuilt Circle House, such a far cry from the old one, with that empty place in its Hearthstone, would only have a goatherd or itinerant farm worker to mind it and stand up and mouth meaningless words at services, sloshing water, tossing salt and tumbling stones around with no idea what the rituals meant or did. Ribas might not have minded it so much if he hadn't been well aware of what had caused all this, what had led to the destruction of Lida's original Circle House and why as far as almost all the upper-caste kunine were concerned, the village did not exist.

He forced himself to swallow the retort that swarmed up his throat like a cloud of wasps. "Of course." *I could read and write before you were sucking at your mother's tits, city boy. Can you?*

The boy handed the scroll over. "Very well. I'm to stay in this village until you write an answer, and then I'm to carry your answer back to them that sent me."

Ribas took the thick, heavy parchment. It had no seal, nothing to tell him where it had come from. If the boy had come from Paret, the closest place to Lida that you could call a city, it might be one of Kunin Dergo's rare letters. The old kunin who had trained Ribas as a priest, though, always sent a boy from the priests' school. Ribas knew those messengers by name. *Them that sent me.* who were they?

He headed to the Circle House's gate. Over his shoulder, he said, "Have you found lodging here?"

"Yes," the boy answered. "I didn't think you people would have an inn."

You people. Ribas wondered how long he might be able to string out writing an answer to the mystery message. It would do the boy good to spend a few days with farm folk, maybe a night or two in a barn if there was some way to manage it. Learn the right way to milk a goat and get kicked around a little for the trouble.

That was only wishful thinking, but Ribas bet he could find more than one way to skin a snide city rat. He held the gate open to let the boy out ahead of him. “The Sheaf and Barrel isn’t too bad, if you don’t expect much,” he said, putting on his best helpful-advice voice. “Nothing worse than mice in the mattresses. Leave them alone and they won’t bite you. Don’t drink too much of Serdo’s wine, though, everybody knows he cuts it with vinegar. Well, I say that, but really he cuts the vinegar with wine.”

If Serdo, who had been Ribas’s friend since childhood, got wind of any of that, Ribas knew he’d have to run for cover. It was worth it to see the boy’s expression. *Tell me you never had to share your bedding with mice, city boy. Rats too.* Ribas knew he ought to be ashamed of himself, but nobody talked about his Lida the way this boy did and walked away unscathed.

“Vinegar?” the boy said. “What about the ale? Is it any better?”

Ribas was pleased to hear how queasy he sounded. “Oh, the ale’s all right,” he said, heading down the path beside the Circle House toward the house he shared with Maryut. “Mind you, a friend of mine did say he saw Serdo pouring the slop bucket into the barrel, but that was after Serdo beat him at Capture. My friend bet on himself, had to empty his wallet down to the last tanas. No doubt it’s just talk.”

The boy gulped. Ribas knew he’d gone too far. Serdo was a mean hand at Capture, certainly; only Ribas’s brother Gedrin could beat him, and Ribas himself would never try. But that business with the slop bucket. Running wouldn’t be enough if Serdo heard about it. For a second Ribas had to fight to swallow his own laughter, but then he was fighting something else.

The cough, his nemesis, raked its way through his body, stopping his breath and filling his lungs with fire. He stopped in the path and leaned hard on the Circle House's fence. He deserved this, oh yes; if he'd had any breath left at all he would have laughed at the awful things he'd said, but he couldn't get any air and his chest hurt. Goddess hear him, it hurt as much as it ever did. Still gripping the scroll, he fumbled in the pocket of his breeches for the scrap of cloth he always carried for times like these. Maryut cut up old clothes and bedding and rubbed crushed lavender on the fabric. She insisted the scent would help him breathe. After the work she put in, it was a shame he had to throw out most of the scraps after he used them, but the bloodstains often wouldn't come out.

He was vaguely aware of the boy coming closer, hovering by the fence. Ribas coughed into the cloth, tasting blood at the back of his throat. The lavender did help clear his head. Pain scorched his chest, but he was used to that. Impatient now, as he always was when the old nuisance got the best of him, he fought for breath.

The boy touched his arm. "Can I help?"

His tone surprised Ribas. No more arrogant gutter rat. Ribas shook his head and clamped the fabric harder to his mouth, trying to stop the cough by sheer force. Finally the fit passed. He willed his lungs in and out, sucking air into his burning chest.

When he trusted himself to speak, he turned to the boy. The messenger's eyes looked huge and dark in his pale face. "I'm all right," Ribas managed. "Nothing to worry about." He wadded up the fabric so the boy wouldn't have to see the blood. Maybe he could throw it on the fire before Maryut saw it too, but he doubted it; she was always too quick for him. He said, "Listen, lad, I was only joking." He had to measure the words and keep his voice steady the way you held a restless horse in check. "You'll find good food and comfortable beds at the Sheaf," he said. "Serdo wouldn't

let vinegar anywhere near his wine, and if you tell him what I said about the slop bucket, he'll string me up by my feet."

The boy stared at him. For a second Ribas expected a tirade, but then the boy burst out laughing.

You can take a joke? Could have fooled me. Ribas would have laughed too, but he didn't have enough breath yet. The boy folded his arms and asked, "So is this how you do things in the country?"

Ribas nodded and pushed himself away from the fence. "That's right." He'd better get home; Maryut would be holding supper and if it got much later, she would come looking for him. "I'll get you your answer as soon as I can."

"Do you need help getting somewhere, zhinin?"

Ribas appreciated the concern, but he brushed it away. "No, I don't live far from here." The day he needed anyone but Maryut to act as his crutch, he might as well lie down and give up. "You know how to get back to the Sheaf?"

The boy nodded. He could have pointed out that even in the dark, there wasn't enough of Lida village to get lost in, but he didn't. Ribas said, "Go on and get your supper then, lad. Good night."

He walked away, hoping he looked steadier than he felt. The scroll felt heavy in his hand. The boy called after him, "Zhinin?"

Ribas made himself stop and turn around. He hoped he would be able to get moving again and not have to sit and rest, the way he sometimes did, before he could manage the last quarter-mile back home. The boy said, "My name's Jano. I'm from Sostavi."

Sostavi? Surprise made Ribas briefly forget the ache in his chest. At the same time, the scroll in his hand suddenly felt twice as heavy.

Sostavi was the capital city on the coast, the seat of power, home of the royal court, the royal Circle House and Namora's high kunin himself. Namorans believed that the Goddess Kenavi had lived there too, centuries earlier, as a human woman. Sostavi was weeks and worlds away from tiny mountain-village Lida.

That explained the boy's attitude. It didn't explain why anyone would have sent him all this way with a message for Ribas. The people of Lida had learned a long time ago that only trouble came from the capital. Ribas hadn't been alive to see it, but he had every reason to know about it.

No, he didn't want to know what this message had to say. For now, he had to get home while he could stay on his feet. "Well, Jano from Sostavi," he said, "I'm Ribas. You know where I'm from."

The boy hesitated, then grinned. His smile showed up bright white in the dark. "Good night, Zhinin Ribas."

"Good night."

Ribas turned away and started walking, one foot in front of the other, while his lungs shouted in protest. Sometimes the old nemesis went away for a while, but it always came back. One of these days it would be too much for him. In a way he guessed he was lucky: when you lived side by side with death, you learned not to fret about it.

The narrow path to his house edged between the Circle House's fence and a bank of mint. He breathed the cool clean scent and followed the line of the fence rails in the dark. Fireflies flared around him, tiny yellow points of light between the dark earth and the stars. With each step he took, the scroll felt heavier in his hand.

Chapter 2

When Ribas got home, the door of Lida's priest's house stood open to let the cool outside air in. Firelight spilled out over Maryut's garden, which bordered both sides of the narrow stone path. The instant Ribas's foot touched the front stoop, Maryut appeared in the doorway.

She wasn't his wife, but he had never stopped wishing he could call her that. He would never have wanted any other wife but the woman who stood in front of him now, small but full to the brim with life, like a satchel packed so full of seeds that they spilled over. She also had all the good looks he didn't: striking dark hair and eyes, skin that turned nut-dark in the sun instead of freckling or going as red and unhealthy-looking as an overripe apple. Ribas's own hair was a nondescript sandy yellow, and his eyes, the blue of the sky on a cloudless summer afternoon, were his only good feature. He had never known what a lovely woman like Maryut saw in him.

Tonight she wore an undyed homespun dress, the kind she always wore around the house. She looked lovely in it, as she would in anything, but almost as often as Ribas wished he could call her *wife*, he wished he could buy her cloth in rich colors like purple and scarlet, the kind wealthy women wore. She deserved no less.

"Ribé," she said, "where have you been? Your supper's been waiting."

Before he could answer, she peered into his face. Ribas sighed to himself. Even in the warm firelight, which ought to make him look healthier, he knew what she must see. Coughing fits left him washed out, with skin that looked like you could poke a finger through it, and bruised circles under his eyes.

"You come inside right now." She caught his wrist and tugged him over the threshold as if he couldn't manage the few steps himself. "Sit down," she ordered. "I'll set out supper. You rest."

Somebody stepped forward from the hearth. "You all right, brother?"

Gedrin. Ribas was surprised to see his younger brother here after they had just seen each other at the service. Gedrin was strong-built and stocky, another person who had all the health and vitality Ribas didn't. When they were younger, Ribas had envied him that. By then, Ribas had already known he was going to be a priest, so he wouldn't have inherited their mother's farm anyway, but he had never cared about owning the land. He had only wished he could work in the fields, digging the soil and swinging a scythe and following the ranging goats over the hills, without paying with pain and the ever-present bloody cough. He had envied Gedrin's ability to do all those things, but he had never envied his brother's mischievous good looks. Sometimes, even now, when he looked at his brother's face and saw the spit-image of their father, Ribas felt an uneasy twist in the gut.

Now he held out his hand. "I'm fine," he said. "What brings you here, Gedri?"

Maryut answered before Gedrin could do more than shake hands. Clattering a ladle in the big pot of soup over the fire, she said, "He says he has to talk to you."

She didn't approve. Nothing could have been clearer. She added, "Now sit *down*, Ribé. I don't want to hear another word out of either one of you till you have your feet up."

Ribas could have told her off for ordering him around, but he knew she wouldn't listen. She never had, starting with the day a dozen years ago when he had reminded her that he couldn't marry her, priests weren't allowed to have wives. She hadn't cared three drops of sour goat's milk for that rule, or for any of the perfectly good marriage offers she had gotten from other men, or for her parents' anger when she'd put her foot down and announced that if she couldn't have the one man she wanted, she wasn't going to have anybody. Ribas had come in for his own share of anger over that. Her mother and father had thought he was leading Maryut on somehow, but they ought to have realized he wouldn't do that. After all, they had known him since birth.

Although, in some ways, they did have a right to be angry at him, though they had never known it. Ribas knew he could have changed Maryut's mind for her, without her knowing a thing

about it. In fact, it would have been easy. He could have reached in, quick and quiet, and *turned* things so that she wanted to marry someone else and never gave him another thought – but he had looked that possibility in the face and refused it.

No reason to dig into that memory now. Ribas followed orders and sat down at their little wooden table. The house had four rooms: the big front room with the hearth and the table and chairs and the hooks for Maryut's cooking pots, two smaller rooms off to the back for beds, and a loft up a narrow flight of stairs for storage. The house was a tight enough fit, but it had solid wooden walls, good sturdy wooden floors instead of hard-packed earth, and a stone hearth. It also had the extreme rarity of one actual glass window in the front room. The windows in the loft and bedrooms had no covering, like most farmhouse windows, so in the winter Ribas and Maryut had to pin up heavy rugs over them to keep the cold air out. Through the glass window, you could look out at Maryut's garden, now hidden in the dusk. The house and its land belonged to the Circle House, rather than to the priests who called it home. In the days when Lida could boast a kunin, the kunin and zhinin had shared the place, each with his own sleeping room, and they had shared meals together. Lida didn't have much room for priestly rank, even in the old days, but the kunin could have claimed the better bedroom and the best parts of the meals prepared over the hearth. The priest's house had stood untouched after the first Circle House was torn down. Sometimes Ribas wondered why, unless no one had been able to stomach ripping out that beautiful glass window, like water made solid, and smashing it to fragments.

Now he and Gedrin faced each other across the little table. Ribas set it down on the table in front of him. Gedrin glanced at it. "What's that?"

Ribas pushed it away. "I don't know. Somebody gave it to me after the service." He wouldn't talk about the messenger or the big city, not before he had some food in his stomach. Before Gedrin could ask more, Ribas said, "Will you have supper with us, brother?"

Gedrin shook his head. “I ate at home.”

“Shame.” The scent of the food – Maryut’s barley soup, if Ribas was any judge – filled the room, brimming with the sweetness of carrots and onions and thyme from the garden. The thought of those first spoonfuls made Ribas’s still-aching chest relax.

Gedrin nodded. “I know. Mama made us eat, though. Wouldn’t hear of us going to service without food.”

Gedrin owned the farm where he and Ribas had grown up, but their mother Pelayut still lived there. The farm had been her family’s for three generations and she, her parents’ only child, had worked it growing up, milking goats and making cheese and tending the grazing herds. Later, after her husband died young, she had kept working it with as much help as her two young sons could give. Now she was older, still strong, but she couldn’t manage everything the way she once had. Ribas knew how hard she held onto what she could still do. After her sons, the farm was her greatest love.

Ribas said, “I was surprised she didn’t come to the service with you.” His mother, he knew, had spent several rocky years arguing back and forth with the Goddess, but now she held onto her faith with the same strength she used on the farm.

“She wanted to,” Gedrin said. “But you know one of our nannies is ready to kid. She didn’t want to leave her when I was going too.”

Maryut brought bowls of soup over to the table. She laid them down at her place and Ribas’s, two solid thumps, and said, “Hasn’t your wife learned how to manage farm chores yet?”

Gedrin flushed. Ribas shook his head at Maryut. Gedrin’s wife Virta was from Paret, had grown up weaving soft wools and linens and embroidering delicate designs on skirts and blouses. She hadn’t learned how to milk goats or birth a kid that was curled up the wrong way. By Lida’s standards, she was a soft city girl.

Ribas thought Gedrin would jump to his wife's defense. Instead, his brother folded his hands on the table in front of him. Ribas saw how white his knuckles had gone. "Actually, Ribé," he said, "that's why I wanted to talk to you."

Maryut stirred her soup more loudly than necessary. If Gedrin had been anyone else, Ribas knew, Maryut would have ordered him out. *Come talk to the zhinin tomorrow. Whatever it is, it can wait till then.* She had spent years trying to protect Ribas from the people who needed him. For now, she held her tongue. Ribas took a swallow of soup and felt the relief of that warmth spreading through his chest. He met his brother's eyes across the table. "Tell me," he said.

Gedrin swallowed. "Virta and I...well, you must have noticed, Ribé. We're not getting along so well anymore."

Ribas heard this kind of thing often. *Zhinin, I'm afraid my husband isn't faithful. Zhinin, my wife doesn't respect me the way she should. Marriage worries only made up a tiny fraction of the problems he heard about. When will I bear a child? My father is sick. My sons fight all the time. Zhinin, I can't find work, what will I do?* Whenever someone came to talk to him, the talk almost always ended the same way. *Please help me.*

All zhinine got requests like that, but none as often as Ribas did. When he had taken over from Odilas nearly twenty years ago, at first nobody had expected him to be any good. He was much too young. Yes, he'd had training, but what did a barely-teenager know about resolving conflicts or healing the sick? For that, you needed to let life hammer on you for a while.

By the end of his first year, Ribas had proven everyone wrong. Nobody had known or guessed why he had turned out to be so good after all. They still didn't know. If he had his way, they wouldn't.

Now he said, sipping his soup, "I've noticed I don't see you two together much. I didn't think you were fighting."

Gedrin put his palms flat on the table, maybe to make himself stop twisting his hands together. “We’re not fighting. I don’t know what it is, Ribé. She’s not happy. We have Raulin and Nita, we have the farm, but she doesn’t *try*. She doesn’t help Mama the way she could. Or me, for that matter.” His eyes held Ribas’s, asking for answers. “Sometimes I feel like I have three children instead of two.”

Maryut cut in again. “Gedrin, you married a city girl. What did you expect?”

Anger woke up in Gedrin’s eyes. “We’ve been married six years,” he snapped. “She should have learned something by now.”

Ribas felt uneasy. If Gedrin had been angry at Maryut for meddling, that would have been one thing, but his anger was all pointed like a spear at his wife. Ribas felt it. He knew about that feeling and how dangerous it could get. His brother wouldn’t turn out that way, would he? Not like the father Gedrin didn’t even remember.

Ribas said, “Is something bothering her? Have you tried asking?”

Gedrin snorted. “Of course I have. She says no, there’s nothing, but she drifts around, picks up a broom like it’s too heavy to hold, can’t be bothered to empty her own chamberpot. Thank the Goddess the children aren’t babies anymore. I don’t know what I’d do. Mama tries not to say anything, you know her, but just the other day she told me she thinks you’re the lucky one after all, Ribé. You have a woman who can pull her weight.”

Ribas knew then how bad things must be. Mama might have welcomed Maryut as a proper daughter-in-law, but she couldn’t approve of her son the priest living with a woman without being married. She also didn’t like what it said about the woman who was willing – who had in fact insisted – on doing exactly that. It would have taken a lot for Mama to say such a thing about her real daughter-in-law, and Ribas knew too how angry Gedrin had to be, to repeat those words in front of Maryut.

Hearing them now, Maryut shook her head. “It’s about time she noticed.”

Ribas put his spoon down and covered her wrist with his hand. “Don’t, Marya.”

She knew when he meant it. She set her own spoon down long enough to touch his hand with her free one. So often, they didn’t need any words. Ribas nodded and asked his brother, “What would you like me to do?”

Gedrin shook his head as if trying to get rid of a fly. “Fix it,” he said, as if that should have been obvious. “The way you do.”

Ribas smiled, but his chest ached again. *The way you do.* There it was.

He couldn’t explain where his gift – if you could call it a gift – came from. He had never asked for it, but he’d had it since childhood, since before he could understand what it did or, for that matter, control it. This problem with Virta, now. Ribas knew he could reach inside, find the right place and *turn* it, to change his sister-in-law in a way that would make Gedrin happy. The gift let him do that.

If he sat down with Virta, her mind would open to him. The gift would make sure it did. The gift would show him lines of light like sun rays, patterns like spiderwebs, shapes whose meanings he understood though he couldn’t have explained how. It would show him the right place to make a *turn*, to change things from the way they were to the way they ought to be.

The question was whether he should. He had learned early on – one of the first things he remembered learning, and it was a lesson he would never forget – he had learned that the gift came with a price. No one should ever pay that price, except himself.

Now he told his brother, “I can try to help her. I’ll need to talk to her first.”

Relief washed over Gedrin’s face. “She’ll come if I ask her. You know she’s always liked you.”

Ribas took another swallow of soup. “I won’t promise anything, though, Gedrí. I know what it might look like, a zhinin can fix anything” – no, not any zhinin, only him – “but you know people have to help themselves.”

As he said it, he decided he would see if he could get Virta to do just that. Make the change herself. If she didn’t want to, though, if she was miserable as a farm wife and wanted to go back to the city, he wouldn’t go inside her head where she didn’t want him to be. He would never do that to a person again.

Gedrin was nodding, looking again like the little boy Ribas remembered who had stumbled on a patch of wild blueberries and devoured them all with his eyes before he put the first one in his mouth. While Ribas and Maryut finished eating, he kept them company, talking cheerfully about the old home farm, how soon he hoped the nanny would kid, how many more kids he hoped to get before the cold weather came. To Ribas, those details were as nourishing as the food. Then, when Maryut cleared the two empty bowls away, Gedrin nodded at the scroll, still lying on the table. “So,” he said, “are you going to open that, or what?”

That was like him too. He had never learned, the way Ribas had, to move slowly and cautiously through life instead of running headlong. He had never been force-fed the lesson that pain came when you least expected it.

Ribas raised an eyebrow. “Is that why you’ve sat here all this time? You want to nose into my business?”

Gedrin grinned, unembarrassed. “Why else?”

“And what makes you think I’ll read it to you? You know you can’t read it yourself, brother.”

That wasn’t strictly true. Gedrin had never fallen under the spell of writing and reading the way Ribas had as a child, but he had a rough-and-ready ability with letters and could parse his way

through most things. Ribas teased him now to try to hide how his own pulse sped up, how his hands got cold at the thought of unrolling that piece of parchment. Sostavi. But how could more trouble come from the capital? The powers-that-be in that city had already done all the damage they could to Ribas's village. There couldn't be anything left for them to take away.

Gedrin took the bait. "Why, you puffed-up old toad. Give that here. I'll show you I can read just like any priest."

Maryut had sat down again and from the look on her face, Ribas guessed she was about to comment on *puffed-up toad*. There was nothing for it. He took the scroll and slipped the leather thong off. "Never mind," he said. "I guess I'll tell you what's in it. I won't get any peace if I don't."

The heavy paper crackled as he unrolled it. With his heart thumping in his throat, Ribas took in the unfamiliar writing. It was small and neat, each letter carefully formed in very dark ink, as if incised in the paper. He read:

To the zhinin of Lida village:

I do not have the pleasure of your acquaintance, but offer you my greetings as one priest to another. You may find this letter's sudden arrival surprising. I ask your patience.

I write to discuss the matter of your Circle House. I am well aware of the destruction your House suffered in years gone by, and I also know that it has been rebuilt, but that it is missing an essential element. The sacred stone, the relic from the Goddess's dwelling place when she lived here on earth as a woman, was confiscated from your Hearthstone when the House was destroyed. If you are already aware of this history, I again request your patience. Without the sacred stone, as you know, your House is not truly consecrated and cannot be claimed as a home of the Goddess.

Zhinin, I feel that it is no longer fit for the people of Lida to suffer the lack of a consecrated House. The incidents which led to the original House's destruction are long in the past, and those who were involved in those incidents are no longer with us. The punishment they incurred should not cause further suffering in others. I write, in

short, to offer the restoration of your sacred stone, that it may be set into your Hearth where it belongs, and that Lida's Circle House may be restored to its former glory.

You will understand that should you choose to accept, you, Lida's zhinin, must come to Sostavi yourself to reclaim your relic. It is of such value that it would not be seemly for me to give it into any other hands but your own.

I have asked the bearer of this message to wait in Lida for the favor of your reply. Yours in the fellowship of the Goddess Kenavi,

Galvo, Chief Kunin, Royal Court of Sostavi

Ribas finished reading and set the scroll back on the table. The words might have been incised into his brain instead of the parchment. *Restoration of your sacred stone. Lida's Circle House restored to its former glory.* And the signature at the bottom: Lida's chief kunin, highest of the high, with authority over all other priests in Namora, some said over Karal Ardo too, the king himself.

That empty place in the Hearthstone that Ribas saw every day. Yes, that was where the relic belonged, the sacred stone from the mortal dwelling of Kenavi herself. Everyone knew that Kenavi protected her Houses, but a House missing a sacred stone wasn't truly hers. It was not, as Kunin Galvo had written, consecrated to her honor.

"Ribé? What is it?"

Maryut's touch on his arm woke Ribas out of his thoughts. She and Gedrin were both staring at him.

You must come to Sostavi yourself to reclaim your relic. Ribas had traveled when he was younger, across Namora's eastern edge and over the mountains into Lassar itself, but he wouldn't undertake any such thing now. Every year his chest got weaker and the cough came more often. The journey to Sostavi and back would take weeks. Anyone who knew him would know that such a trip might be out of his reach.

Kunin Galvo didn't know him. The chief priest of Namora had no way of knowing the zhinin from lowly Lida.

"Ribé," Maryut repeated, impatient now. "For pity's sake, say something."

Ribas couldn't. Wordlessly he handed her the scroll. She couldn't read as well as he did, but between her and Gedrin, they would make it out.

For those few minutes, he could have silence while he tried to think what to do. Restoration of the Circle House. The chance to right an old wrong. Kunin Galvo couldn't know that the condition he put on it might not be possible: he didn't know Ribas.

Ribas knew him, though. Oh yes. He had never met the chief priest, but he knew him very well.

Maryut and Gedrin had their heads together, poring over the scroll. Ribas closed his eyes. In the dark he saw the latch on the Circle House's door, the rusty iron that squealed and fought back each time he opened and shut it. All that was left of the first House.

Ribas hadn't been alive to see it happen, but he knew that the old House's walls had been torn down, the stones carted away and scattered beyond any chance of finding them again. Some people said the carts had gone all the way to the northern coast, at least a couple of weeks' journey, so the stones could be dumped in the sea. The sacred stone, the Hearth's keystone, had been confiscated and taken back to the court in Sostavi. The old House's wooden roof and door had been burned. Somebody, though, had forgotten about the latch. The iron had survived the fire and somebody else had dug it out of the coals. When Lida's Circle House was rebuilt, they had put the old latch back, and there it had stayed.

Ribas knew who had ordered the stones torn down and the fire built. That man's signature was on the bottom of the parchment that Maryut and Gedrin were studying now.

The incidents which led to the House's destruction are long in the past, and those who were involved in those incidents are no longer with us. Maybe that was Kunin Galvo's apology. Maybe, after all these years, he had decided to make amends. Ribas knew, though, who "those who were involved" referred to. It wasn't a "they" at all: it was one person, and Ribas knew, too, why that person was gone.

Too many things out of the past, out of a dark place better left forgotten. Maryut and Gedrin had already parsed enough of the letter to start exclaiming over its contents. Soon, soon, Ribas would have to come up with something to say, but he could find no clear place inside himself, no solid rock to stand on.

Please help me. Where did the zhinin go for help?

Chapter 3: in Sostavi

Kunin Galvo surveyed the Capture board with satisfaction. It was an old board, but the fine wood still glowed like honey and the polished stone pieces felt rich and smooth under the fingers. Galvo had ordered it specially made thirty-five years ago, when he was appointed to the group of kunine who served the Royal Court of Sostavi. It had marked the first Capture of his long career: the first of many.

The Royal Court's kunine had a house of their own, on Sostavi's central square opposite the palace. The zhinine had a separate house, near the royal Circle House where King Ardo and Queen Raina went to services. The zhinine's dwelling was decent enough, but the House of the Kunine was magnificent. Stone walls, high ceilings, carved cornices, glazed windows: it looked grander than the royal Circle House itself. Some people felt this was inappropriate, but Galvo approved of it. After all, when he had first arrived in Sostavi, the kunine had lived in a much humbler place. He had orchestrated many of the changes since.

Now, after thirty-five years in the capital city, he was the undisputed master of the House of the Kunine, with its grand rooms and its views of the ocean. This afternoon, between the midday meal and evening service, he sat in the Great Hall before the main stone hearth, at the richly-carved table made of machia wood imported from Lassar. The tall windows behind him let in late-afternoon sunlight and showed the restless play of the ocean against the rocky coastline, but Galvo did not turn around to see it. He concentrated on the Capture board in front of him.

Five of his opponent's pieces, two heavy Defenders and three sleek Raiders, waited in a neat row in Galvo's prison at the back of the board. Short those important pieces, Galvo's opponent had to divide her attention between trying to rescue them from prison with her two remaining Raiders, and sending her own Master piece after Galvo's. The game would end when one of the two pea-

sized Master pieces, Galvo's fire-orange one or his opponent's grass-green one, captured the other. Galvo already knew which it would be. He had not lost a Capture game in years.

He enjoyed winning. Each time, he savored it as he would savor a draft of the dark woody ale that the King ordered shipped all the way across the eastern mountains from Lassar. Now, one of his opponent's two free Raiders made an intrepid push toward Galvo's prison. Galvo sent his own Raider after it and casually scooped up the daring piece and deposited it in the back row with the prisoners. He enjoyed winning, but he had to admit, though he would never do so aloud, that after all these years its flavor had faded somewhat. The same way that after too many drafts of ale, the tongue could no longer distinguish the taste and the fogged brain no longer cared.

His opponent looked up from the board. "I'm afraid you have me, my lord. Should we stop here?"

Galvo smiled. "The game only ends with the capture of a Master."

His opponent shook her head. "I can't defend myself, my lord. You'll have my Master in two moves, maybe three."

"Then it won't take long to play it out."

Galvo knew there was no need to play it out, but a win without the necessary steps didn't have much worth left at all. He needed to hold the grass-green Master in his hand.

He knew, of course, that he could beat this opponent, Tali Sundraikas, King Ardo's military commander and – at least nominally – chief advisor. Tali was another import from Lassar along with the ale and machia wood. Galvo had suggested, and the King had agreed, that the soldiers of the vast empire to the east knew much more about military strategy than anyone small peaceful Namora might have to offer. What did farmers and fishermen know about warfare? And though Namora had very little in the way of a standing army, with no threats to fight off from tiny Dorva and Otera to the south, and though it had, too, a long-standing relationship with Lassar and her emperor Shurik

to the east, one could never be too careful. It only made sense to have a military commander who could, if the need arose, serve as a strong right arm to the King.

Of course no Namoran woman would have become a soldier, much less military commander. Tali Sundraikas's like was unheard of in her new country, but the Lasska took a more pragmatic approach to raising a military force. Women were considered as able as men to inflict damage. Better, in fact: apparently the Lasska believed women had a natural vindictiveness that made them dangerous. It was strange, Galvo sometimes thought, that a nation that worshipped a male god – the bear-headed Mesha – also honored the power of its women, while Goddess-worshipping Namora did not.

In any case, Tali came highly recommended by Impera Shurik himself, which was essential for Galvo's favor. Rumor flew in Sostavi and beyond that Galvo had the King's ear, and that in fact Karal Ardo spoke more with the Chief Kunin's voice than his own, just like his father Filtin had before him. Galvo would have denied that accusation with his last breath, if he had ever taken the trouble to explain himself to anyone. The King did as Galvo wished, and if Galvo might have more reasons than the ones he stated for wanting to bring in a military commander from Lassar, woman or not, those reasons were no one's business but his own.

Or at least, the King had done as Galvo wished up until now. Would that continue? Galvo tasted the thought briefly, then brushed it aside, lining it up with the rest of the pieces in his prison. He concentrated on the play.

If one person should have been able to match Galvo at strategy, that person was the King's chief soldier. Galvo knew how much it frustrated Tali not to be able to win the game. That was why he didn't request her presence in the House of the Kunine too often. Galvo had grown up on a farm and knew that in planting season, you could scatter certain seeds thickly, but others you had to put

in the ground carefully, not too close together and only when the weather and soil were exactly right. Discontent worked the same way. So the game he played with Tali today was the first in a fortnight.

The military commander was younger than Galvo by a couple of decades at least. She stood a head taller than the fragile silver-haired priest and looked like she would easily be able to pick him up and sling him over her shoulder. All the more satisfaction, then, when after a pair of moves Galvo scooped the grass-green Master off the board and hold it up between thumb and forefinger.

Tali shook her head. “Well played, my lord.”

She spoke Namoran perfectly, but her faint Lasska accent added to her voice’s wine-like richness. She had the dark skin common in Lassar and long dark hair that she wore tied back in a single sheaf like a horse’s tail. Both of those things made her stand out in the streets of Sostavi, where the population tended toward the pale and blond, and where the women wore their hair in knots or twists on the backs of their heads. The military commander didn’t try for beauty, but Galvo couldn’t help noticing that with her high cheekbones, straight nose and large dark eyes, she could have achieved it if she had wanted to. She would have needed different clothes, though. Here, off duty in this visit to the House of the Kunine, she wore plain leather breeches and a linen shirt. Namoran women never put on breeches, but apparently in Lassar they did, at least if they were soldiers. Galvo felt that in Tali’s place, he would at least have carried his military sword of office at all times. Galvo himself always wore his stone-gray kunin’s robes, even between services in his own dwelling.

Usually, after winning a game, the priest would have suggested a rematch, but today he had more important things to discuss. He scooped the pieces together, enjoying their smooth weight in his hands as he always did, and put them back in the wooden box along with the board, folded neatly in half. Then he put the box aside and faced Tali across the table.

“So,” he said. “Impera Shurik requires a higher tribute from Namora.”

Namora and her southern neighbors Dorva and Otera, the three countries collectively called “the Fisheries” because of their access to rich waters, had paid tribute to Lassar every year since the first Impera, Curin the Great, had sat on the Lasska throne in Cheremay. Curin had unified the smaller countries to the east of the Senai Mountains, but had decided that crossing those mountains to invade the west would require too much time and sacrifice of the soldiers he needed to hold his new empire together. So the tribute came into play. The three Fisheries, anxious to maintain friendly relations with their massive new neighbor to the east – who, granted, chose not to invade now, but you never knew what might happen later – accepted the payment as the key to their continued independence and their stable relationship with the Lasska government. Impera Shurik had kept the same tribute in place for years. Only a week ago, though, he had sent a message to Sostavi that in the fall, when the tribute was collected at the end of the busiest fishing season, he would expect a quarter increase in the size of Namora’s. Only Namora’s. The two other Fisheries were unaffected.

Tali nodded. “Yes, my lord. It doesn’t seem fair, I agree.”

Galvo studied her candid expression and hid a smile of satisfaction. She was more than intelligent, he knew, but she was young and lacked Galvo’s own years of political experience. And this new game afoot would, he felt sure, prove much more interesting than Capture.

He said, “I didn’t call it unfair. It seems so to you?”

This could be a test of Tali’s loyalty. Galvo assumed the Lasska knew that. Was she on the side of the Impera she had lived under all her life, or on the side of Namora’s Karal, supposedly her own King now? Galvo waited to see what play she would make.

Her expression didn’t change. “The three Fisheries have always paid the same tribute each. To ask for more from one and not the others, yes, my lord, I call that unfair.”

“But Namora has the richest fishing waters.”

“The other countries could make up the difference,” Tali said. “They have farmland and vineyards.”

“So the size of the tribute doesn’t worry you, as long as all three countries pay the same.”

In other words, Tali was a mercenary who wanted to see her emperor well paid, no matter what hardship that brought her new country. Galvo knew other people would have flinched or squirmed under the implied criticism. He couldn’t help feeling impressed that this woman didn’t. She said, “Impera Shurik has the right to decide how much tribute gets paid, my lord. Curin the Great set it down that way in the treaties he gave the Fisheries, and everyone signed those and agreed to his terms.” Her voice held no hint of accusation, but Galvo knew schooling when he heard it. Again, he felt faintly impressed; not many people in Sostavi would have dared to suggest that the chief kunin wasn’t exactly right in everything he said. Tali went on, “But it’s true, if the Impera raises the fee for one, he should do the same for all of them or not do it at all.”

Galvo said, “Well, to tell you honestly, Karedin Tali” – using her title, an honorific – “I asked you here not only for the pleasure of our Capture game, but also to discuss this issue with you. As you know, the King asked that the Impera’s request not be made public until he had time to consider it.”

This was true. When Karal Ardo had received Impera Shurik’s message, he had called Galvo in at once to put the matter before him. The young king was as skinny and nervous as his old father Filtin had been. Generations of keeping a wary eye toward the mountains, and carefully collecting and sending tribute money every year, seemed to have bred a twitchiness into the bones of the Namoran kings. Galvo had noticed, though, that since Ardo’s marriage to Karala Raina – a lovelier woman than a man like Ardo should have deserved, even if she was, so to speak, a *commoner* – and especially since the birth of their first son, Azulin, the king seemed to be trying to square his perpetually rounded shoulders and look people directly in the eye, rather than studying their chins or

foreheads the way he used to. Still, Ardo had been all deference when he showed Galvo the Lasska demand. Ardo had found it shocking. He hadn't known, wouldn't be able to consider the idea, that to Galvo, the message came as no surprise. Ardo had told the chief priest that he would discuss the situation with Tali as well, and had asked – begged would be a better word – that Galvo discuss it with no one else. Namora's people wouldn't like the demand.

Now, at the machia table, Tali said, "Yes, my lord. The king did tell us to keep the matter private."

Galvo nodded. "I wanted to tell you that he has in fact considered it, and reached a decision."

The king had told the chief priest his decision only that morning. Galvo saw the flicker of surprise in Tali's face and knew Ardo hadn't spoken yet with his military commander. Galvo had expected that. He savored the satisfaction of delivering the news.

The woman said, as calmly as before, "And what did he decide, my lord?"

"He said that we would pay the tribute, as Impera Shurik demands."

Ardo had not been happy about it. Galvo had stood in the king's private chamber and watched the young man twisting the end of the red belt that tied his white robes of office. "If we refuse," Ardo had said, staring at Galvo's hair line, "no doubt we will provoke them. No karal has done that since the first treaties were signed. Of course, no impera has changed the tribute this way, only for us." Ardo's eyes had moved to Galvo's face as if winched there. "But we cannot stand up to Lassar."

Galvo had agreed. "No, your Highness. No karal has ever risked waking the Bear."

Ardo had said, "But why is Impera Shurik doing this only to us? Paying so much will come as a hardship. It will hurt our people, and it will be my fault."

Galvo had answered what he had known Ardo needed to hear, soothing words about the people trusting their king. To be safe, he also put in another reminder that Namora was far too small to incur the wrath of the Bear. He had not added that he knew exactly why Shurik had made this demand, that in fact Galvo had been the first to know of it. He and Shurik had corresponded about it almost a full year earlier.

He didn't tell Tali that now, either. Hearing the king's decision, the military commander couldn't hide her shock. "I thought he might at least have tried to negotiate," she said.

Galvo nodded. "I agree. Between you and me, Karedin, I don't believe this decision on the part of his Majesty is in Namora's best interests. I think we would be better served if he refused the increase."

He didn't actually think that at all. It could never be in Namora's best interests to provoke Impera Shurik, who was known to be a strong and decisive leader, aging perhaps since he had come to power three and a half decades earlier, but who tolerated no opposition and commanded equal measures of his people's loyalty and fear. No Lasska citizen, the commoners at least, had a word to say against Shurik. There were rumors, and Galvo knew them all, that no one spoke against the Impera because they knew what would happen to them if they did: that Shurik's soldiers crept into hidden places the way termites crept into wood and the Impera had ears everywhere. No one knew how true this might be except Shurik himself, and Galvo considered, probably Namora's high kunin also.

Over the past thirty-five years, Galvo himself had watched Shurik's career with a mixture of satisfaction and admiration. The Lasska emperor had turned out to be exactly the kind of leader Galvo had hoped. The chief priest admired the fact that Shurik not only kept an iron grip on power but ruled his country well. One could argue, perhaps, that a good ruler shouldn't require his people's fear – Karal Ardo would certainly make that argument – but under the Impera's rule, Lassar had

become stronger and more profitable than ever. The army, in particular, had always been a formidable force for its sheer size, but under Shurik's training had become the most skilled and dangerous weapon in the world. It was an arrow ready to be loosed, a spear ready to be thrown. All Lassar's neighbors to the east and west knew it, and none of them would risk becoming the target of that coiled power.

But now Galvo suggested that Namora's king should refuse to pay the new tribute. He told Tali this with a straight face, while in his mind's eye he maneuvered Capture pieces so easily that he had to struggle to keep from laughing.

Tali studied him. The military commander's expression surprised Galvo; only slightly, he wasn't used to surprise, but he hadn't seen an appraising look like that in a long time, and certainly not from a woman. She said, "Do you think the king will reconsider?"

Galvo filed her expression away for further consideration. He said, "I think he may. Again, strictly between the two of us, I have taken the liberty of seeking counsel elsewhere."

Tali did look surprised at that. "You told someone else about this? But, my lord, the king said..."

Galvo interrupted smoothly. "No, karedin, I've told no one. But I have written to someone who, I believe, may be able to offer his Majesty advice."

The military commander couldn't hide her bafflement. Galvo fought to keep a straight face. The intrigues of the capital had always been a great source of pleasure for him. This latest maneuver, though, offered him an entirely fresh level of excitement. The new person – the new game piece, one might say – that Galvo was about to bring into play...even Galvo wasn't entirely sure what to expect of him. So much might be possible, though. Oh, yes, so much.

Tali threw caution to the winds. "Kunin, you and I are the king's main advisors. I have to ask, who is this person you wrote to? How much does he know?"

Irritation, confusion: Galvo gloated over those feelings, though he hid it carefully. “He knows nothing at all, my lady Tali.” No harm using another honorific. “He is a zhinin from a mountain village. Lida, it’s called. You won’t have heard of it. It’s an entirely insignificant place.”

Tali shook her head as if she had gotten water in her ears. “What does a zhinin from a little village have to do with all this?”

Everything, my lady karedin. He has everything to do with it. Galvo said carefully, “This man has a particular ability. He is a skilled negotiator.”

More than that. Much more. If Shurik knew how to insinuate his eyes and ears into hidden places, Galvo had learned that lesson from the Lasska emperor, and he dared to say, might have improved upon his teacher’s technique. He felt sure that no one in Lida, least of all the object of the surveillance, had any idea how closely he had been watched or for how long. Years of surveillance in a tiny village where nothing happened, where Galvo’s ears and eyes had grown heavy and bored and impatient with waiting, but it had been worth it, to find this prize.

Ribas Silvaikas. Galvo allowed himself to savor the name. A zhinin from nowhere, but not from nowhere. From a village long ago ground under Sostavi’s heel, a village that needed something, longed for something, almost as much as Galvo himself longed for the last and best Capture he would make in his life. Lida’s need would bring the zhinin here to Sostavi. Galvo knew it as clearly as he knew his own name. And then...

Tali, across from him, drummed her fingers on the table. “A negotiator.”

Galvo nodded, certain his face and voice betrayed nothing. “I am familiar with his ability. He is known for resolving conflicts; he’s known, in fact, to be remarkably persuasive. I feel sure that if we lay the situation out for him, he will agree that the king should reconsider. And when he discusses it with his Majesty, I think he may be able to prevail.”

It was difficult, so difficult not to laugh. Yes, Ribas Silvaikas would be able to make Karal Ardo think differently. The zhinin's ability had not been seen in Namora for generations, but it had existed here before. Galvo had researched it in the royal library's extensive historical texts. It was nothing short of magic.

With the proper persuasion, Zhinin Ribas could do anything. And, skilled at persuasion as he was himself, he would soon meet someone else who knew how to apply the correct pressure in the correct place.

Tali said, "So you have written to this priest, but you haven't told him anything?"

She had left out *my lord*, Galvo noticed. He nodded. "I have asked him to come here, to the capital. I feel the issue would be better discussed in person. We have time, after all. The tribute won't be collected for some time yet, and the impera assumes we won't resist."

The priest should have Galvo's message by now. The messenger should have gotten to Lida yesterday, maybe the day before. Galvo wouldn't tell the military commander this. It took two weeks, traveling light and fast, to get from Sostavi to the Senai Mountains. Tali would be bound to wonder how the messenger had known to leave a fortnight ago, when the demand from Shurik had only arrived last week.

She said now, "And will the priest come?"

Another blunt demand. Galvo put on his best soothing voice. "I believe he will, karedin."

"Why?"

Another surprise. What did it matter why he came? Or, Galvo could say, of course he would come, because the high priest had asked it. This Lasska import was more interesting than Galvo had hoped. In return for that fact, Galvo gave her a piece of the truth. "He will come, because we have something he wants."

Tali sat back. The incipient anger had left her face and Galvo met that cool appraising look again. She said, “My lord kunin, I wish I knew what to make of you.”

Galvo did let himself smile at that. “Your honesty does you credit, karedin. I fear, though, that in this city, you would be better served using it less.”

Tali nodded. She had folded her hands on the table in front of her. Galvo noticed their easy strength even at rest. The commander said, “I know that. I’ve been in this city six months, long enough to know it. It’s a fault of mine, though, my lord. I haven’t learned to be different.”

Galvo raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps you’ll learn that lesson here.”

Tali’s expression didn’t change. “Maybe so. I have to say I hope not.” They studied each other again, briefly. Then Tali said, “If we are finished here, kunin, may I take my leave? I have matters to take care of in my quarters.”

“Certainly, Karedin. Thank you for meeting with me.”

After the commander had gone, Galvo pulled the Capture box toward him again. The wood felt as smooth as fine fabric under his fingers.

A negotiator. That thought, and the pure pleasure of the game, still made Galvo want to laugh. At the same time, though, as he ran his fingers over the wood, he mulled over another piece of information he had not given Tali.

Ribas Silvaikas. Namoran patronymics didn’t specify whether the offspring was a son or daughter. Tali Sundraikas, with the patronymic she had adopted, was the child of Sundar. Ribas was the child of Silvas.

If the priest had been anyone else’s child, Galvo might not have known about him. He might never have found his prize.

Silvas, my friend. Galvo had not conjured up that face in his memory in years. It had been young, the last time he’d seen it. Young and angry and betrayed. No, Silvas wouldn’t call Galvo a

friend now. Sent back to his village, with his life in ruins around him, Silvas had probably cursed Galvo up until the day he died.

And now Galvo was bringing that man's son to the capital. How much did Ribas know about his father's past? Might Galvo's new playing piece have an agenda of his own? Retrieving Lida's sacred stone might not be enough. Would the zhinin want a more effective and permanent way of righting the wrongs done to his father?

For all his surveillance, Galvo couldn't be sure. The priest from Lida was a peaceful man. Galvo's eyes and ears had told him that much. Ribas was frail, too, probably frailer than the much-older chief priest himself, with a weak chest and a cough that sapped his strength. He didn't need physical strength, though. Not with the ability he held in his mind.

Galvo studied the grain of the Capture box. Danger, then. At least the possibility of it.

He liked that. He liked it as much as he had enjoyed the feeling of playing a Capture opponent who might be able to beat him. He hadn't experienced that feeling in years.

Silvas, my friend. You were always the only one.

The two of them: ambitious young men fresh to Sostavi from the farm country. Galvo, the court's newest kunin, and Silvas, most junior of junior advisors to Karal Filtin, with the surprising brilliance at mathematics that had seemingly released him from a thankless life as a landless itinerant farm worker. Even in those days, no one else could beat Galvo at Capture. No one but Silvas.

If you hadn't been so clever, Silvas, we might both still be here. You might share in this last game.

But if Silvas hadn't been so clever, if he had not been forced to leave Sostavi and go back to Lida, this last game might not be taking place at all. If he hadn't gone back to Lida, Silvas wouldn't have married a farm girl. Ribas would not have been born.

All of these playing pieces, lined up in neat rows in Galvo's mind. He closed his eyes. With the sound of the ocean beyond the windows beating endlessly against the coast, Galvo imagined the moves the players would make, and how together they would carry him to triumph.