

Prologue: “Fourteen Stones,” a Namoran folk tale dating to the earliest years of worship of the Goddess Kenavi (first century SM)

Once there was a woman who wished to build a house. Not a house for her husband and children: she had no husband yet, was too young to have children, and in any case she meant to live alone a while longer. She loved the scent of the wind, the warmth of the sun, and the sound of the sea as it rushed and broke against the rocky shore of her land. While she could, she wanted to have those things all to herself.

She was a strange woman, or at least, so her people thought. She had strange eyes, the color of the sky on a cloudless autumn day, and she had a strange will, all edges and corners and fierce stubbornness. She did not seem to understand that people were meant to live together and help one another. The world was an uncertain place. Enemy tribes roamed the land. Wild creatures fed on the tame goats that meant food and certainty. People were meant to live together behind high stone walls, guarded by spears.

This woman, though, loved to walk beyond the walls, fearing no strange man or creature. Her people called her Klaya, which means wanderer. She let the wind brush her hair, let the sea lick her fingers, let the sun brown her skin. She was happiest when alone.

When her people built houses, they made them of stone, behind their stone guarding wall where men paced back and forth with spears. Her village stood on the end of a peninsula. The houses clustered on the flat land and up the side of a long green hill. To build a new house, people dug rock out of the hill or carried it from the shore. Home was built out of the home land.

But Klaya loved the wider land. The peninsula and the village rested in her heart, but the broad mainland fanned itself out before her eyes. She walked there at will, greeting the woods, learning the feel of the grass of the plains under her bare feet. She would build her house on the

green hill, but she would build it separate, touching no other walls, sharing no other air. And she would build it not only out of the stone of home, but out of pieces of the world beyond.

Houses needed many heavy rocks, carried and shaped and laid into place by scarred and callused hands. Klaya's hands were strong, toughened by years of weaving rope and working skins, of digging and planting in the earth. But her body was slender, a tall young tree, her muscles more supple than hard and her chest and shoulders fine and narrow.

One day, her people watched her leave behind the safety of the guarding wall and walk out to the mainland. They muttered and whispered about her strangeness, the house she meant to build and live in all alone. They asked themselves why she could not be a woman such as any other. And they watched, later, as she limped back, dragging behind her a rough-made sledge of branches that carried a single large stone.

The next day they watched her go out again. And they whispered about how she could dig stone here on the green hill, or carry it up from the shore. She wished to punish herself, surely. She wished to show how wayward she was. They said they would leave her to it.

But on the third day, as she left again, one man went with her. She did not ask for his help; she lifted her head proudly and walked alone with him behind. When they came back, the sledge held two stones.

That night, over his cooking fire, the man told others what Klaya wanted. She wished to bring stone from each part of the mainland she knew. The forests, the coast, the grassy plains. She wished to have pieces of each place she loved in her home.

What difference did it make, the people asked. One stone was like another. Surely no one could see the difference between one dug from the hillside and one carried from the mainland forest. But the next day, two men left the village with Klaya. When they came back, the sledge held three stones.

On it went. Another day, and another, and now the women of the village joined, and then the children. Always Klaya walked at the head of the group, her head held high. Each day the sledge carried more.

On the day they brought back eight stones, they built a bigger sledge. And still they went out again, and again. On the last day, all of the tribe went. The smallest children rode on their parents' backs or in their arms. The elderly leaned on the strength of the young. When they came back to the village as the sun dipped down to the horizon, the sledge carried its biggest load of fourteen great stones.

Klaya declared herself satisfied. She would need to take no rock out of the hill or from the coast. The stones the tribe had helped her carry would be enough.

She meant to live alone, but she was not left to build her house alone. The villagers stayed, helping her cut and shape the rock with chisel and mallet, helping her lift and set it into place.

Then the house was finished and the village went about its business. Klaya lived on the green hillside with the freshness of the sea wind and the warmth of the sun around her, and the home she had built out of the world she loved.

Chapter 1: in Lassar, Year 1665 SM

On the day Khari marked the start of her sixteenth year, a clear day in the middle of autumn, her tribe's Lodestone, Pradesh, called a council. Khari was there. Normally, a girl too young to take a man would have had no business sitting with this group, but as of today, Khari had stepped into her role as the lesser of the tribe's two Lamp-Carriers.

Every tribe needed a Lamp-Carrier. The Lodestone, always a man, had to set the course for the tribe's travels and decide how to plan the tribe's daily life so the people would flourish. But to set the right course, the Lodestone needed the Lamp-Carrier.

Lamp-Carriers were always women. You had to be born to it. Khari was the fourth and youngest girl in her family, and the only one who had the right dreams come to her at night in her sleep. Tonight she sat at the fire, close enough for the warmth to wrap around her and push away the chilly fall breezes, next to the woman who had trained her to use her dreams. That woman, Vatiri, had been the tribe's only Lamp-Carrier for a long time. Now her dark hair, which she wore in a single long braid down her back, showed more silver in the firelight than Khari wanted to see.

Pradesh and his younger brother Radavan, and the old man Bakar who had marked seventy-eight years, and Pradesh's nephews Handan and Mandhani – the tribe's two strongest and, Khari thought, most arrogant men – and young Rahul, valued for his intelligence, all gathered around the fire too. The rest of the tribe, under Pradesh's orders, went about its usual evening work.

Pradesh waited until everyone else had settled before he took his place in the circle. All the others sat on the ground, but Pradesh used the special chair made of machia wood that he'd bought years ago in a Lasska village. Khari tried not to roll her eyes. Pradesh was a decent Lodestone, everyone thought so, but by rights he should have offered the chair to Bakar. Khari knew the old

man wouldn't have taken it, but Pradesh had only marked his thirty-ninth year this spring. He was too young and strong-built, in spite of some extra flesh around the middle, to need a special seat.

He settled pompously into it and folded his hands against the spread of his yellow shirt. Only Lodestones wore yellow, the color of the Sun God. Khari arranged her face into its most respectful expression when his eyes passed over her.

He turned to Vatiri. "What do you have to tell us?"

Khari bit her lip. Even a Lodestone ought to sound more respectful to a Lamp-Carrier. Vatiri had marked sixty years, enough to be Pradesh's mother, but Khari knew the older woman respected the Lodestone as second only to the Sun God and the other Powers themselves. She had tried to teach Khari the same lesson. Khari had never been as good at it.

Vatiri looked around the circle. "Last night I had a direction dream."

Direction dreams, the dreams that helped the Lodestone set the tribe's course, were the Lamp-Carrier's job to have and interpret. It made sense for Vatiri to have one now, as Pradesh decided where the tribe should set up its winter camp, but a curl of worry twisted in Khari's stomach because she herself hadn't dreamed anything in particular last night. Also, for the first time she could remember, Vatiri hadn't told her about her own dream.

Khari wondered if she could have missed something in her sleep. She had spent the last eight years learning how to dream with one corner of her mind always awake, watching the pictures that moved across her mind, constantly sifting them for what mattered. The Lamp-Carrier's dreams were a gift, but holding onto them in daylight and knowing what they meant were skills. Vatiri had helped Khari build her skills until, the older woman said, Khari would be at least as good at the work as she herself was. Pradesh trusted Vatiri absolutely. So had the two Lodestones before him. Khari had felt proud to think she could do as good a job, but now she wondered.

Failure, on her first day as a full Lamp-Carrier, would be more than embarrassing. Then Vatiri turned to face Khari directly, and something in the older woman's expression drove Khari's worry away and replaced it with a hard, solid stone of fear.

As if the two of them had been alone, Vatiri said, "I'm afraid of what's going to happen to us. Our tribe, and all the Vaia people."

Khari stared. *All the Vaia people*: not just Pradesh's group, but all the tribes of Pala Vaia, the First and Lost Ones? Khari knew her people roamed the great country Lassar from the mountains in the west to the ocean in the north and east. How could something happen to them all? What direction dream could have shown Vatiri something so huge?

Pradesh said, "Explain."

Vatiri's eyes stayed on Khari's face for another moment and Khari thought she had never seen anyone look so sad. Then the older woman turned to face the Lodestone and the rest of the circle.

"Lassar's new ruler," she said. "Shurik."

All of them knew the name. The Vaia had always lived in Lassar, but they never settled in Lasska towns or villages, and had as little to do with the people as they could. They all knew, though, that Shurik had become Lassar's new ruler – the *impera*, he was called – at the end of the summer, after his father Mangevar died. Mangevar had been an old man and Shurik was a young one. That was all Khari knew.

Now Vatiri said, "He doesn't want the Vaia here."

Again, something in her voice settled deep in Khari's stomach. Sadness of a kind she had never heard before.

Bakar spoke up. "No Lasska ruler has wanted us here."

Khari looked across the circle at the old man, who sat at Pradesh's left. The tribe's younger men cut their hair short, but Bakar wore his long, the old way, in a single white braid down his back. The firelight brought out the deep lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth. His skin stood out dark against the bright blue fabric of his shirt. Khari thought he looked as strong as old wood, the kind that weathered so tough that if you took an axe to it, it would bite back.

Bakar said, "The Lasska have wanted us gone from the beginning, but we have more right to this place than they do. We came here first."

Khari knew the story, how the Vaia tribes had been the first to arrive in the country east of the great mountains, more generations ago than anyone could count. Other people, with paler skin and a different language, had come later. The newcomers had claimed the place as theirs, because they built first houses, then villages, towns, and cities. The Vaia didn't leave marks on the land.

Vatiri said, "Shurik is different."

Pradesh asked, "How?"

Vatiri closed her eyes briefly. To Khari, her face looked shrunken, her white blouse too much like the cloths the tribe used in burying the dead. Khari knew the older woman was looking inside herself, examining the dream again to tell its truth, but she desperately wanted Vatiri's eyes to open.

There wasn't much comfort when they did. Vatiri's words fell on the circle like the endless snow that fell on Lassar's northern forests.

"In the great city, Cheremay, Shurik is calling his fighting men to him." Khari had never seen Cheremay, the "eye of Lassar" where the rulers lived, but she had heard about the throngs of people, the shoulder-to-shoulder houses and buildings, the sky-clawing temples the Lasska built to their bear-shaped god. Vatiri said, "He is giving the men weapons. Swords, knives, and the powder that burns and explodes and throws balls of lead." Khari had heard about this too. The Vaia didn't

use such weapons, and Khari didn't know how powder, apparently not much different to look at than earth, could explode. Vatiri finished, her voice still calm and quiet, "Shurik is sending his men out, with their weapons, to hunt us."

Hunt people, the way you would hunt deer and rabbits to cook over the fire? Did Shurik's men eat human flesh? That couldn't be true. Fear crawled all over Khari's skin.

So this was why Vatiri hadn't told her anything. This morning, Khari had braided Vatiri's hair the way she always did, weaving in strands of the bright yarn the older woman loved, and Vatiri had put matching yarn in Khari's own two braids. It was a symbol that they belonged to each other. Vatiri had kept this huge, shadowy secret to herself for as long as she could, and Khari knew that was mother-love too. But, through the fear that seeped into her and made her huddle closer to the fire, Khari wondered why she herself hadn't seen anything. How could she have missed something like this in her dreams? What was wrong with her?

Across the circle, Bakar was shaking his head, whether in disgust or disbelief Khari couldn't tell. Neither he nor Pradesh spoke.

Pradesh's brother Radavan did. "Where are these fighting men now?"

Radavan had taken Khari's oldest sister, Dahila, as his wife ten years ago. They had twin girls and a boy, and another child on the way. Khari liked her sister's man. He was the Lodestone's brother, but he didn't strut around because of it, and he was better at listening than Pradesh.

Vatiri said, "They're in Cheremay and other great cities. Shurik is gathering them together and telling them what to do. He'll send them out soon."

Handan, Pradesh's older nephew, spoke up loudly. "So they'll come and we'll fight them. Lasska men aren't worth piss."

Khari fought down another urge to roll her eyes. You could trust Handan to say something stupid. His brother Mandhani agreed with him. "We're stronger than any of them. Let them come."

Vatiri said, “They’re well-armed. Their weapons are more dangerous than anything we have.” Vaia men valued physical strength, running and wrestling, but fights were only friendly contests, and they hunted with snares, arrows, and spears. Khari knew Shurik’s men were different. Vatiri added quietly, “They will kill us if they can.”

Handan jumped to his feet. “Let them try!” he shouted. Mandhani scrambled up too as if ready to face off against Lasska soldiers then and there. Rahul said something to Bakar that Khari couldn’t hear. Radavan held his hand out as if trying to quiet the chaos.

Pradesh said, “Enough.”

The word fell into the circle like a stone into water. The talk died and the Lodestone’s nephews sat back down. Pradesh said to Vatiri, “What did the dream say we should do?”

Vatiri turned to Khari again. Khari knew that somehow, whatever she was about to say would be worse than anything they had heard yet. The older woman said gently, “The dream said we can’t do anything.”

Khari understood. Vatiri’s dream had meant the end of the tribe.

Handan and Mandhani were shouting again. Khari heard them from what felt like a long way away. Vatiri was still looking at her, and Khari read endless grief in the older woman’s eyes, as if Vatiri’s dream was bringing this horrible thing down on them.

Khari couldn’t take it in. She had only marked sixteen years. She had barely become a woman, had never served as a real Lamp-Carrier or offered the Lodestone a single direction dream. This couldn’t be the end of everything; but Vatiri’s dreams never lied.

“Enough!”

This time the word was a shout. It sliced through the frozen fog that had wrapped around Khari.

Pradesh was on his feet. Anger burned in his face. For the first time, Khari understood how his authority could stand second only to the Powers.

“Vatiri,” he said. His voice was quiet now, but deep and full of fire. “I want to hear exactly what you saw.”

Asking a Lamp-Carrier to tell a dream itself amounted to challenging her truth. Lamp-Carriers didn’t tell raw dreams to anyone but another Lamp-Carrier, if there was one, because a dream meant nothing unless you knew how to read it. Khari knew she should have felt angry at Pradesh. She couldn’t now.

Vatiri lowered her head in submission. “I saw a great bear,” she said, “bigger than any bear in the world, and a stone house that stood taller than any trees. It touched the sky.”

Khari knew this meant Shurik. The bear was the Lasska god Mesha, that the Lasska rulers thought they served. Khari knew perfectly well that only the Sun God, Moon Woman, and Mouth of Winds were real. You could see and feel those Powers, and they ruled the world. The Lasska, though, believed in Mesha, and the stone house would be the place in Cheremay where the impera lived.

Vatiri went on, “I saw a river. It was made of many streams coming together, out of different places: the forests in the north, and the plains in the south, and the coast in the east, and down from the mountains in the west.” She had closed her eyes again, and spoke as if she was drawing one word at a time out of a deep place in herself. Khari knew how hard it was for Lamp-Carriers to talk about their dreams. How much harder would it be to do it now, in front of the men, with the awful shadow hanging over them all?

Vatiri said, “The river ran fast and steady, straight into the stone house.”

Handan said, “A river doesn’t go into a...”

Khari spun around to snap at him, not caring if he was the Lodestone's nephew, but Pradesh got there first. "Quiet, boy."

Boy was an insult to a grown man and a hunter as skilled as Handan. Khari was glad to see his face redden in the firelight. Vatiri went on as if no one had interrupted. "The water ran through the house and came out the other side in a pool. A lake. It was burning."

Pradesh spoke quietly. "The water was burning?"

Vatiri nodded without opening her eyes. "Yes, but it wasn't water anymore. It was shining like metal. The bear was waiting outside the house. It started to walk away and the water began to flow again, in streams, back toward the places it came from. It burned as it went."

Khari shivered. Everything Vatiri had said about the dream was exactly right. Shurik had armed his men with fire and danger, and they were going out where he had sent them. Then Vatiri said, "And I saw a field and a patch of sunlight on the grass. One of the streams came to it and burned it away. Not just the grass, but the light too. The light was gone."

Khari knew no one could mistake the meaning of that. The sun meant the Vaia, their God. Shurik's river had taken it. Horror closed over her. Vatiri had stopped speaking and sat very still. She looked exhausted. Khari wanted to reach out, touch her shoulder or take her hand, but she couldn't move.

Pradesh said, "Khari."

Khari looked up. The Lodestone had taken his seat again. In the firelight, with the anger gone from his face, he suddenly looked much older. He said, "Did you see this too?"

Khari felt sick. She didn't wish she could say she had seen it – how could she wish for something like that? – but she hated having to admit such a failure. It didn't matter now, but she was supposed to be a Lamp-Carrier too.

"No, Lodestone," she said. "I didn't see anything."

Mandhani said, "If she didn't see it..."

Handan cut in. "She's still only a girl. She's not a real Lamp-Carrier."

Khari opened her mouth to argue, but beside her, Vatiri slumped forward. Khari caught the older woman's shoulders. "Amma," she said. *Mother*. "Amma, are you all right?"

The men were talking and arguing again. The noise swirled around Khari, but she held onto Vatiri and focused on nothing else. The older woman's eyes opened. In spite of everything, she smiled.

"I'm all right, child. Only tired."

Radavan made himself heard. "Khari, you and Vatiri go back to your tent. Don't speak about this to anyone else yet."

Khari nodded. She was only too glad to get away from the circle, as if somehow everything she'd heard wouldn't be true if only she could go somewhere else. She helped Vatiri to her feet. The two of them made their way slowly away from the fire, while behind them, Pradesh called the men to order for a council that, Khari felt sure, would go on through the night.

She wanted to ask Vatiri why she, Khari, hadn't had the same terrible dream. She wanted to beg the older woman for answers, some kind of hope, but Vatiri was too tired to talk. She leaned on Khari like a crutch as they walked back to their tent, through the camp that had settled into nighttime stillness. Khari was glad no one was out and about. If anyone had spoken to her, the impossible secret might have flown out of her mouth so that it wouldn't choke her anymore.

In the tent, Vatiri lay back on her pallet without stopping to get undressed. Khari bent over her. "Can I get you anything, Amma? Are you sure you're all right?"

Vatiri smiled again, without opening her eyes, and pressed Khari's hand. "Don't worry about me," she said. "Let's both get some rest."

Khari doubted she could rest, but she obediently closed the tent's cloth flap. She hadn't brought a lantern or lit one inside the tent, but she knew the space too well to need light.

Eight years she and Vatiri had shared this tent. Many years before that, Vatiri herself had woven the fabric for it, strong undyed wool, and oiled it with sheep fat against the weather. The Vaia kept only what they could carry, so the tent only held a few things: two cooking pots, clay plates and mugs, a few extra clothes, the sleeping pallets. Vatiri had hung bunches of sweet herbs from the center pole. Their light clean fragrance filled the space.

Khari took off her blouse and leather breeches, folded them, and laid them on the floor next to the pallet. She unbraided and brushed out her hair and pulled her light wool shift over her head. The new white blouse, marking her status as a Lamp-Carrier, stood out in the dark. Only Lamp-Carriers wore white, the Moon Woman's color, second only to the yellow of the Sun.

Khari lay back on her pallet and pulled the blanket up over her against the fall chill. She probably didn't deserve to wear the white blouse. She hadn't seen the single most important and terrible direction dream ever to come to the tribe. How could she think of herself as a Lamp-Carrier after this?

After a long silent while, in spite of the worry squeezing down on her chest, she found her eyes closing. Dreams rose and lapped around her.

Dream with your eyes open. Tonight, maybe, it was useless, but she couldn't forget her training. That tiny corner of herself stayed awake, watching. Probably there would be nothing to see. Probably she would find no hope or help, none of the direction a Lamp-Carrier should find...

...but as sleep took her, there was something. A face.

A man's face. No one she had ever seen before. Light-skinned. Hair the brown of autumn leaves, but heavily streaked with silver. Not a young face, but not an old one. A plain face, except...

...the eyes. Blue eyes. Deep lines at their corners, but the blue of a perfect cloudless sky.

Khari slept. In a corner of her mind, the face stayed.

Chapter 2: the zhinin

Huge Lassar, newly under the rule of Impera Shurik, had three neighbors to the west, on the far side of the chain of mountains that ran from Lassar's northern to its southern coast. Those three neighbors – Namora, Dorva, and Otera – together made up less than half of Lassar's size. Only the biggest of them, Namora, shared a border with Lassar. The little country's eastern edge crouched in the shadow of the Senai Mountains.

The three small countries together were called the Fisheries, because all of them relied heavily on the rich waters of the Vandeni Ocean. Namora had not just fishing boats, though, but farms and vineyards too. The Namoran calendar marked the times of planting and harvest along with the high holy months.

Derla, the third month before the end of the year, was the harvest. Life sped up to a feverish pace during those weeks. Everyone pulled together at harvest time, especially in the little villages where the center of town gave way quickly to spreading fields and orchards.

One little village, Lida, sat just to the west of the Senai's foothills, almost exactly halfway between Namora's ocean coast to the north and the bay coast to the south. Lida's shops and businesses clustered around the village square. Five roads, lined with houses roofed with tiles of gray-blue Namoran clay, came out from the square like the spokes of a wheel. Farther away, banks of mint took over the sides of the road, and the cultivated yards and graveled roads gave way to dirt track into the countryside.

In the square, though, one building stood out. It was the biggest, the only one made of stone, and unlike all the others, it was round. Its wooden roof formed a low cone above the perfectly curved walls.

This was Lida's Circle House, where the villagers came together to worship the goddess Kenavi. Bigger towns had more than one House, and the Namoran capital, Sostavi, had many, including the Great House where Namora's ruling priest held services in person. But Lida was small enough that one House could serve everyone: one House as the heart of the village, and one priest as its keeper.

This priest's name was Ribas Silvaikas. His rank, *zhinin*, was the lowest of the four ranks in the Namoran *dagira*, or priesthood. In spite of that, all the villagers in Lida and most of the surrounding villages and towns knew he was one of the most important people in the world.

He and his wife, Maryut, lived in the *zhinin*'s house just behind the Circle House. People came there any time of day and most hours of the night, whenever anything had to be done that only the *zhinin* could do. Today, though, on a Second Day – Antdina – morning in the middle of Derla, Ribas and Maryut left the *zhinin*'s house and locked the door firmly. This was a yearly harvest ritual. Not even the *zhinin* could get away from the demands of Derla; at least, not if he didn't want to.

Ribas was moving more slowly that morning than he would have liked. His nemesis, the heart weakness and chest pain left over from a long-ago illness, had kept him awake most of the night. Even so, he held the harvest as sacred as any of the Circle House rites. He hadn't been strong enough to be a farmer, but he had to honor some things.

After he locked the house, Maryut put her arm through his. "I suppose you still won't let me talk you into riding up to the farm," she said.

Ribas smiled down at her. After more than a dozen years of marriage, he still wondered sometimes how he had been lucky enough to win this woman for good. All the physical strength he didn't have, she did: she was small and vivid, as full of life as a satchel brimming over with seeds. Her dark hair and eyes had played tricks with village boys' hearts since back when they had all been

children together. But she had only ever had eyes for the farmer's-boy-turned-zhinin, never mind his weakness and the fact that his looks wouldn't impress anybody. He'd be the first to admit that his eyes were his only striking feature, their clear blue his only obvious inheritance from his beautiful mother.

Now he said, "I'm all right. The walk will help."

Maryut pursed her lips. "Well, don't blame me if your brother and mine have to carry you home."

Ribas laughed. "It won't happen. Mama can't spare the horses today."

They went across the square to the road that headed most directly north out of the village. It was still early, the light soft with the last traces of dawn, the air crisp and cool. Ribas breathed deep. He had spent most of his life here, except the years he had been in the priests' training school to the north, and the time afterward he had spent traveling, but he never got tired of savoring the air of the mountains. The scent of the late-growing mint blended with the dry earthiness of fallen leaves and that particular wine-like purity you found nowhere else. If he had been blindfolded and dropped in Lida, he thought, he would have known he was home.

Outside the village, birds sang, late insects chattered in the grass, and to the east, the gray peaks of the Senai reached up toward the perfect sky. Ribas and Maryut walked in silence for a while. Both of them wore rough clothes that wouldn't get hurt by the day's work: Maryut in an old homespun dress and Ribas in the loose shirt and slacks, "farmer clothes," that he still and always preferred to his sea-blue zhinin's robes. It was a fine day for a walk. Ribas knew it would have been smarter to hire a horse and buggy; he would get tired long before the day's work ended, and he still had to lead the evening service at the Circle House tonight. He knew, though, exactly how far he could push back against his nemesis. He had lived with it since he was six years old, and he never gave it any more room than he had to. Bad enough that it made him look and feel at least ten years

older than he really was. Most men didn't have a headful of gray hair when they weren't yet thirty-five.

The north-running road went past three farms before it got out into the open land between Lida and Paret, the closest real town. The last of the farms was the place where Ribas and his brother Gedrin had grown up. Their great-grandfather had built it almost a hundred years ago, and their mother Pelayut still lived there. Harvest time, for Ribas, always meant going home.

Maryut squeezed his arm. "Will it do any good if I tell you not to work too hard today?"

"What do you think?"

"I think I know how stubborn you are, Ribé."

Her brown eyes laughed up at him, but he knew she meant it. She had married him knowing he would never have perfect health again, and she spent their shared life taking care of him and trying to protect him from the people who, she sometimes argued, needed him too much. He knew he had to be a nuisance, but she insisted she couldn't do without him. He promised himself every day that he would make it into old age.

He pressed her hand. "I won't be too stubborn."

"Whatever that means."

"You and Mama always rein me in."

"Your poor mother. I know how much trouble you gave her. I don't know how she ever put up with you."

Mama would have laughed if she had been there to hear that. It was an old joke. Ribas had given her plenty of trouble after his father's death, when Ribas was almost seven. Never mind that Ribas's own sickness had followed right on the heels of the ceremonies of memory and release for Silvas Jadraikas. Gedrin had only been a baby then, and Ribas had known how much help his

mother needed with the farm work. She'd had her hands full to force him to stay in bed and rest after the fever that had almost taken him away from her.

They could laugh, now, about how stubborn he had been, but looking back, it still surprised him that they could. So much darkness around those days. So much pain during the years that had led up to Silvas's death. Enough, in fact, that his death and Ribas's illness almost felt like the first return of light.

Ribas put the memory away. No time for that now, on this clear morning, on the way back to the place he loved and the work he would have spent his life doing if his body had allowed it. He and Maryut passed the second of the farmsteads, and then a clean new split-rail fence marked the edge of his brother's land.

The lower fields had a good crop of squash, potatoes, and tall grass for hay, but the main work of the day would happen up in the apple orchard. Ribas and Maryut went up the side road that led to the old farmhouse. Beyond the low, sprawling wooden building, the proud stand of apple trees stretched from the northwest to the southeast edge of the property. Ribas saw the farm cart and the two horses already in harness at the near corner of the orchard, ready to haul the harvest back to the tall barn and the waiting cider press.

Pelayut Silvenis's apples, and everything she made from them, were famous in Lida. Gedrin had taken over the orchard and its harvest when he turned eighteen, but everyone still talked about Pelya's apples and Pelya's cider as if she, rather than her father, had set out the apple trees and tended and refined the crop until you couldn't find a better apple anywhere in Namora. At least, the villagers said so, and Ribas thought they were right. His mother's apples had firm pinkish-gold skin and pink-veined flesh that combined just the right amounts of tartness and sugar. The cider made from them was a pure, clear gold. Whether you drank it fresh or fermented it to make the hair-curling *abuwisk*, people said a drop on a dead person's tongue would bring him back to life.

As Ribas and Maryut came up to the farmhouse, the front door swung open and a small shape came flying down the path to meet them.

“Uncle Ribé! Auntie Marya!”

Ribas’s four-year-old niece Asira cannoned into him and flung her arms around his legs. Ribas scooped her up. “Sira, child, aren’t you supposed to be helping pick apples?”

The little girl had dark curls like her father’s and green eyes like her mother’s. She stuck out her bottom lip in a pout. “Da says I’m too little. Tell him I’m not, Uncle Ribé. Tell him I can do it.”

“Well, I don’t know about that.” Ribas knew about the hazards of apple harvest time: falling fruit, non-bearing branches that had to be trimmed, the bustle and hurry in the orchard. A small child could easily get underfoot. He also knew that his brother Gedrin was much more protective of his daughter than his son. Gedrin had let Raulin help with the harvest when the boy was Asira’s age. Ribas said, “Nobody can change your da’s mind much.”

“That’s true,” Maryut told Asira. “Your da and Uncle Ribé aren’t much like each other, but they’re both plenty *stubborn*.” She made a face on the last word.

Asira laughed. Ribas lowered her to the ground. “We’d better get to work,” he told her. “Or else your da will be scolding us.”

The harvesters were no doubt at the orchard already: Gedrin and his wife Virta and their son; Maryut’s brother Darin and his two tall boys; probably their friend Seldo and his wife from the inn in the village, who bought plenty of the fresh-made cider every year. Before Ribas and Maryut could go and join the group, the house door opened again and Ribas’s mother came out onto the porch.

Pelayut Silvenis was no longer young, but she stood tall and moved with an easy grace that denied her age. Her hair, under her widow’s kerchief, was silver rather than the wheat-gold Ribas remembered, and sadness and time had etched lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth, but those

eyes were still the striking blue of a cloudless sky. Ribas remembered when Mama had been beautiful but fragile, more a girl than a woman in spite of marriage and motherhood. Now, and for a long time, the fragility had gone, replaced by strength that made Ribas think of a proud tree unbent by wind and weather.

She smiled at her son and daughter-in-law. “Good morning, you two.” Then her eyes stopped on Ribas’s face. “Should you be here today?”

The walk had helped, but Ribas knew he probably still had circles under his eyes. On the worst mornings, they made him look like he had walked into a doorframe. Maryut said, “I asked him that already, Mama.”

Mama sighed. “I’m sure you did.”

The two women were very different, but their faces looked uncannily similar as they fixed Ribas with identical looks. He held his hands up defensively. “You know I can’t miss the harvest.”

“I know you won’t,” Mama said. “That’s different. But since you’re here, come inside a minute. I need to talk to you.”

Asira said, “Auntie Marya, come back to the orchard with me.”

“All right.” Maryut took the little girl’s hand. “Let’s you and me go find out what they’re up to back there.”

The zhinin’s house by the village square had been Ribas’s home for fifteen years, ever since he had finished his apprenticeship and been installed to serve in the Circle House. Still, the farmhouse, with the light and the scents he had known from birth, said *home* to him more than anywhere else.

The front room that he stepped into now, with its great open hearth, was the oldest part of the house. His great-grandfather had built the single room first, and then added the loft, and later, after his wife nagged enough, the kitchen at the end of the narrow hallway. The extra bedrooms off

the front room had come later still, when Mama's father thought he would have more than just one child. He hadn't, but those rooms had come in handy for guests and workers, and later they had meant that Mama's two boys each had a bedroom.

The front room had one small east-facing window. At this time of day, without a fire in the hearth and with no lamps lit, the room was dim and cool. The smoke of years' worth of hearth fires hung around the dark old walls and roof beams.

Mama went over to the hearth. "Come sit."

The hearth had a semicircle of four chairs by it, two rockers and two straight-backed seats. Mama sat in one of the rockers and Ribas took the other, facing her. He said, "You're not going to tell me off for coming up today, are you?"

Here, alone with her, he could feel the worry wrapped around her. If he wanted, he could find out more about what she thought and felt without her having to say a word.

His physical weakness wasn't the only thing that had taken him away from the farm. The other one was the strange gift that had come to him after his illness. He had never understood why it had happened, why that mysterious thing had settled on him, but it meant he could do things no other zhinin could, and it made him more valuable than ever to the people he served. Now, it meant he could have reached into his mother's mind and seen even more than her words could tell him; but he wouldn't do that unless he had to.

"I won't tell you off," she said. "I need to talk to my zhinin."

That was a joke between them. Ribas knew how proud she had been when he was installed as Lida's first "home-grown" zhinin since anyone could remember. He also knew how strange she felt that her boy should have to take care of her and everyone else.

Ribas held his hand out, palm up: the zhinin's ritual, formally asking for a confidence. It was really meant to get a reluctant person to talk, but Ribas thought Mama might need the reminder not to worry about how her son might feel about whatever she had to say.

She laid her hand palm-down on his. He closed his fingers gently around hers, sealing the contact. "Tell me," he said, and let go.

She folded her hands in the lap of her brown homespun dress. "I'm worried about Gedrí."

Ribas hadn't expected that. He saw his brother all the time, and Gedrin always seemed strong and healthy and cheerful. "What's going on?"

"In the last couple of days, he's seemed different to me. Maybe it's nothing."

She wouldn't tell him about "nothing." Ribas felt the beginnings of worry closing around him too. "Different how?"

Mama's hands lay quiet in her lap. "Impatient. Angry."

Cold settled on Ribas. On the surface, it didn't sound like much, but he had hoped never to hear this. For a long time, he had trusted he never would.

Gedrin didn't remember their father. Silvas had died when Gedrin was only three months old, too young for his father's anger and unhappiness to mark him permanently. At least, Ribas had always hoped so. Ribas himself remembered his father much too clearly: that was no surprise, since his brother was the living image of Silvas.

But Gedrin wouldn't remember the things their father had done. He had no reason to turn out like Silvas. Ribas made himself ask, "What have you seen?"

Mama looked at him steadily. She had learned so much courage, his brave and beautiful mother, during the worst times long ago. She said, "This morning, for instance. At breakfast, Raúlí was talking about how many apples he'd pick today, and Sira said she would pick more. They were laughing, you know, teasing each other. Then Gedrí told Sira she was too little to help. She started to

argue, the way she does. Talking back, you know.” Ribas did know. Mama said, “Usually Gedrí laughs when she does that.” Ribas knew that too. His brother was proud of the spirited little girl. “But this time,” Mama said, “he was angry. He told her to stop, and he was cold, Ribé. Cold enough to scare her.”

The worry tightened around Ribas. It would take a lot to shake Asira out of her confidence, and *cold* wasn't a word that had ever fit his eager, impetuous brother. He remembered how a word from his father could fill the old house with a chill that didn't lift for hours. That had been Silvas's mildest kind of anger, the kind that didn't leave Mama in tears, or split skin open or leave bruises that ached bone-deep.

Mama said, “I want to ask you to look at him, Ribé. Into his mind.”

There it was. The gift Ribas had never asked for, never wanted, that set him apart from everyone else in the world he knew. The thing that, along with his illness, had changed the course of his life forever.

When it first came to him, he had thought it was because of the fever-dreams. He'd thought he was still imagining things that weren't really there, but then the fever left and the things he saw stayed. Around people, animals, anything with a mind, he saw lines and patterns of light. Their colors and brightness told him what the owner of that mind felt, in every detail.

He didn't know how he understood the patterns, but somehow he had, right from the beginning. It was like knowing how to read a language without having to learn the words. That alone would have been strange enough, but there was another piece. Not too long after he realized he could see the patterns, he learned he could change them too. He could cut pain. Ease fear. Help grief to heal.

Of course he had to be a zhinin. No one else could have been so qualified. And he wasn't strong enough to be a farmer, though as a boy, he hadn't wanted to do anything else.

Now, after fifteen years of using the gift to help people in Lida and any number of other villages and towns, he had gotten used to carrying it. Even so, he always used it carefully. It claimed a price for what it gave.

He said, "I'll look, Mama. But if something's wrong, I can't promise to fix it."

"I know."

Some people thought the gift was magic, or should be. When Ribas first took over as Lida's zhinin, Namora's powers-that-be, in the capital in Sostavi, had thought he should go there and use his ability "for the good of the country." They'd thought it was a waste for him to stay a zhinin in a backwater village. Ribas had needed every drop of his stubbornness to weather that storm. Mama, of course, knew what the gift could and couldn't do. She had been the first person to see him use it, many years ago. He would never forget her trying to tell him it didn't scare her, or how clearly he knew that wasn't true.

Now she said, "I only want you to look. If something's happening..." Her hands tightened briefly around each other, and then relaxed again. "It's best if we know."

Maybe it's nothing. Ribas thought the words but didn't say them. No sense holding onto hope that might not be real.

The two of them went out to the orchard. Work was well underway in the southeast corner. Ribas saw Maryut's brother Darin high up in one of the trees, picking from the upper branches and loading the apples into a wicker basket tied to a rope looped over a branch. Maryut herself stood at the base of the tree, holding the other end of the rope ready to lower the basket when it was full. Seven-year-old Raulin, with a basket of his own, worked on the lower branches of the same tree. Seldo and his wife Milya made a team at another tree, and beyond them, Ribas saw his brother Gedrin and Gedrin's wife Virta at a third. Apparently Gedrin hadn't noticed yet that Asira, instead of staying back the way she'd been told, was scurrying around, picking up apples that had fallen on

the ground, checking them for soft spots, and adding them to her brother's basket. Raulin made no protest. In fact, the little boy snuck over to whisper to Ribas, "Sira and I are going to get the most baskets. You watch."

Ribas nodded gravely. "I believe you." Raulin, small and serious-faced, with tousled brown hair, reminded Ribas of himself as a child. The boy added, "You won't tell Da she's picking, will you?"

Ribas watched Asira for a few seconds. She was being careful, glancing up to keep an eye on what was going on above her, putting the bad apples in a pile at the edge of the orchard. She knew what to do. Ribas decided she ought to be allowed to help. Besides, if he tried to stop her now, she'd probably launch a storm of protests loud enough to bring all the trees down around them.

Ribas winked at his nephew. "I won't say a word." Raulin grinned and went quickly back to work, and Ribas walked over to the base of his brother's tree.

Virta saw him coming and waved. Eight years ago, before she'd married Gedrin, she had been a town girl from Paret. She still didn't dress like a farmer's wife. Any time she could spare, she embroidered complicated designs on her simple homespun dresses because she loved pretty things. Ribas knew some of the villagers, especially farm women, looked down their noses at that, but he sympathized. His brother's wife was delicate and lovely, with soft curling hair and big green eyes. The embroidery she loved suited her better than the hard, unending farm work, but she did the best she could.

"Morning, Ribé!" she said as he came up.

He didn't see any signs of trouble in her face. Whatever happened with Gedrin must have been over quickly. "Morning, sister. How are things?"

She pointed up toward the basket hanging from a high branch. "Almost full already. Gedrí!" she called up. "Your brother's here!"

Ribas heard rustling up above and then Gedrin's face appeared through a gap in the branches. "Took you long enough!"

Ribas felt a wave of relief. His brother sounded the same as ever. He called back up to Gedrin, "I do the best I can. These old bones don't move too fast, you know."

"You *are* old. It's a fact. Wait a minute, I'm coming down."

Gedrin shinned down the tree as easily as a boy. From a low branch, he jumped down to the ground.

Ribas knew that no one seeing the two of them together for the first time would think they were related at all. He had gotten his mother's height and lighter coloring, while Gedrin had their father's strong stocky build, and hair and eyes the color of freshly turned earth. Both their parents had been handsome. Ribas thought he himself must have taken after some nondescript cousin or uncle lost to the past.

Gedrin looked exactly the same as usual too. He grinned at Ribas, and then seemed to see something else. "Are you up for this?"

"My wife and our mother already asked me that," Ribas said. "Don't you start."

Gedrin laughed, but put a hand on Ribas's shoulder. "You know you don't have to work."

"I don't know that at all."

Gedrin, always barreling through life on overflowing energy, had never been able to imagine what it must be like not to trust your own body. Ribas remembered, when they were boys, how upset Gedrin had gotten when Ribas gave up his claim to their mother's farm. Zhinine couldn't own land, so when Ribas was seventeen, apprenticing to old Zhinin Odilas, he had formally signed away his claim so he could be installed in the Circle House when the time came. Ten-year-old Gedrin had insisted to the point of tears that Ribas shouldn't do it. He had to stay on the farm, Gedrin had said: the two of them had to work the land together. Nothing Ribas had explained about how he couldn't

keep up with the work, and how anyway Gedrin would need the farm for his own family someday, had made any difference. Gedrin had firmly believed that Ribas could be a farmer, if only he tried hard enough.

These days, Gedrin knew more about what Ribas's nemesis did, but he still couldn't really imagine living with it. Ribas was glad. That was only one of the things he'd never wanted his younger brother to experience. Now he said, "Seems to me you won't get all this work done by yourself."

Gedrin waved a hand at the busy workers at the other trees. "Do I look like I'm by myself?"

"You need somebody responsible around."

Behind Gedrin, Virta laughed. If Ribas was old, according to family rules anyhow, Gedrin was permanently young and green and reckless. Ribas kept a straight face, but he was going to have to look into Gedrin's mind, and soon. The gift only worked when he could look directly at the mind's owner. He said, "Where do you want me?"

"How about here? Get a basket and take the low branches." Then Gedrin looked past Ribas at something else. "Goddess hear me! I told that girl to stay back!"

He had spotted Asira. Ribas saw the change in his brother's face. Even without using the gift, he knew the truth in his gut.

He had watched Gedrin grow up, watched that round boyish face turn steadily into their father's. He had never feared it as he had feared Silvas's, because he had known Gedrin wouldn't turn out the same way. Now Ribas knew he had been wrong.

The zhinin couldn't be afraid. Ribas put his hand on his brother's arm. "Gedri."

His brother looked back at him. Anger, out of place but far too familiar, twisted the face Ribas knew so well. In that moment of eye contact, Ribas reached for the gift.

As a child, he had learned that he didn't have to see the patterns all the time. He couldn't have explained how he had learned to put the gift away, like setting it a box and closing the lid, but he could do it. He was glad not to see and know things all the time.

Now he took it out and let it unspool the patterns for him. In them, he saw proof of what he already knew.

Anger made a net around his brother. Too-thick, too-bright red lines wove around Gedrin's mind, trapping and gripping it tight. Anyone could get mad now and then, but for something like this, the feeling had to have deep roots. This kind of anger could tear up anything it touched.

When had it started? When had it gotten so strong? Ribas wished he had made a point of checking in on his brother. The zhinin couldn't be everywhere, all the time, but if Ribas had seen this sooner, could he have stopped it? Or had it flared up suddenly, like a thunderstorm blowing up overnight?

Useless questions. Gedrin looked at him suspiciously. "Brother, I didn't ask you to do that trick of yours."

He couldn't know Ribas was looking, but he knew about Ribas's rule never to use the gift without permission. Ribas said, "If I'm looking at you funny, it's because I don't think you should scold your daughter for working. You want her to grow up lazy?"

He made it a joke. He had learned to control his own feelings a long time ago, and he'd offered thanks to the Goddess, many times, that no one could read him the way he read others.

Gedrin seemed to believe him now. "Is it better for her to grow up disobedient? I told her she wasn't working today."

The immediate anger was fading. Ribas knew the net was still there, but at least Gedrin's face had lost that ugly cast. Ribas said, "She's stubborn. She comes by it honestly, you know."

Gedrin smiled reluctantly. Ribas knew he had won, for now. “Fine,” his brother said. “But if she starts whining because she’s tired, or if an apple falls and knocks her on the head, you’re dealing with it.”

“Obviously. Her da won’t be nice enough.”

They got to work. Gedrin climbed the tree again as easily as he’d come down it. Ribas got a basket and started on the lower branches.

Up above, Gedrin launched into a tune about the merry springtime. He had a good voice, rich and warm, and he belted unapologetically about digging furrows and sowing seeds until Virta reminded him that they were in Derla, not Ivesta, and maybe Gedrin should think about how there were little ones around, not to mention his brother the zhinin. Gedrin called back down that everybody here knew the basic facts of life, but all right, he’d change the words if nothing else would do, so he sang about Derla and plump apples ripening on the branches and the delights of sweet juicy fruit until Virta shouted at him to stop, that was worse than ever. Laughter and scolding flew back and forth between them.

Ribas worked steadily, filling his own basket with the rhythm of picking that came back to him every year. Sometimes, when he came up here, it was easy to imagine that life had gone the way he’d thought it would when he was a boy. That he’d stayed healthy, the gift had never come to him, and that he and Gedrin had shared the farm until they’d had to work out how to divide it between their families.

Today, though, those imaginings didn’t come while he worked. The weight of the gift on him, and the zhinin’s responsibility, were solid and real. When the harvesting group took a break for midday dinner, he would have to get Mama alone and tell her what he’d seen. He knew what the news would mean to her, and how her face would change as she heard it.

She had told him, many times over the years since his father's death, that Silvas had once been different. That when he and Mama had first gotten married, Silvas had been happy. Of course he'd had rough times. Before his marriage, he, too, had studied to be a zhinin, and in fact he'd gone all the way to Sostavi, but something had happened there and he had come back changed. Mama said that, at least at first, marriage and the farm and his firstborn boy had given him all he wanted. Apparently, in those days, Silvas had told Mama that he wouldn't have traded his life with her for anything he'd left behind in the great capital city.

Ribas wished, sometimes, that he could dig far enough back in his memory to pull up an image of his father happy. Maybe a memory of being lifted up in strong arms and seeing a laughing face.

Silvas had changed at some point. Now Gedrin was changing: Gedrin, who had never carried bruises made by his father's fists, who had never listened to Mama cry at night, or crept out into the dark silent house to climb into her lap and hug her and wish, uselessly, to be a man strong and fierce enough to protect her. Gedrin, who had never tried to use his own small body as a barrier between his parents, and who had no memory of that horrible, impossible night when Silvas died.

Virta's basket had filled up and she had gone to empty it into the waiting cart. The sun climbed slowly higher in the sky. Ribas stayed in the rhythm of bending, reaching, picking, as the air slowly warmed around him even in the shade of the trees and Gedrin, above him, whistled another tune.

Could he help his brother? The red lines of the web burned in Ribas's mind as he worked. He knew that the gift would, at least, let him reach in and try to cut one line of the web at a time, until it loosed its hold on Gedrin. He also knew the price the gift would take. It had no strength of its own, so it would take all that Ribas had and more. And even if he could cut the web, the anger would still be there in Gedrin's mind, the lines of it like branches ready to re-grow after pruning.

Maybe if Ribas hadn't had a bad night. Maybe if he didn't feel so tired now, he would believe he could cut those lines and set his brother free. Right now, though, with his worn heart aching in his chest, and his muscles pushing against fatigue to carry on the rhythm of the work, he knew he could do nothing.

The work went on in the bright, beautiful morning. Ribas pulled the fruit down and wished, more fiercely than he had since he was a child, for all the strength he didn't have.