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TAMORA PIERCE



The Will of
the Empress

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Tamora Pierce

SCHOLASTIC PRESS  NEW YORK

Dedication

To my intelligent, talented, idealistic, imaginative, enthusiastic fans, of all ages, of both sexes, of all religions and races and ethnic backgrounds: you give me hope for the present and future. You're the reason why I love to keep doing what I do. Nobody—but *nobody*—has cooler fans than I have.

Thank you so much for taking my books into your lives.

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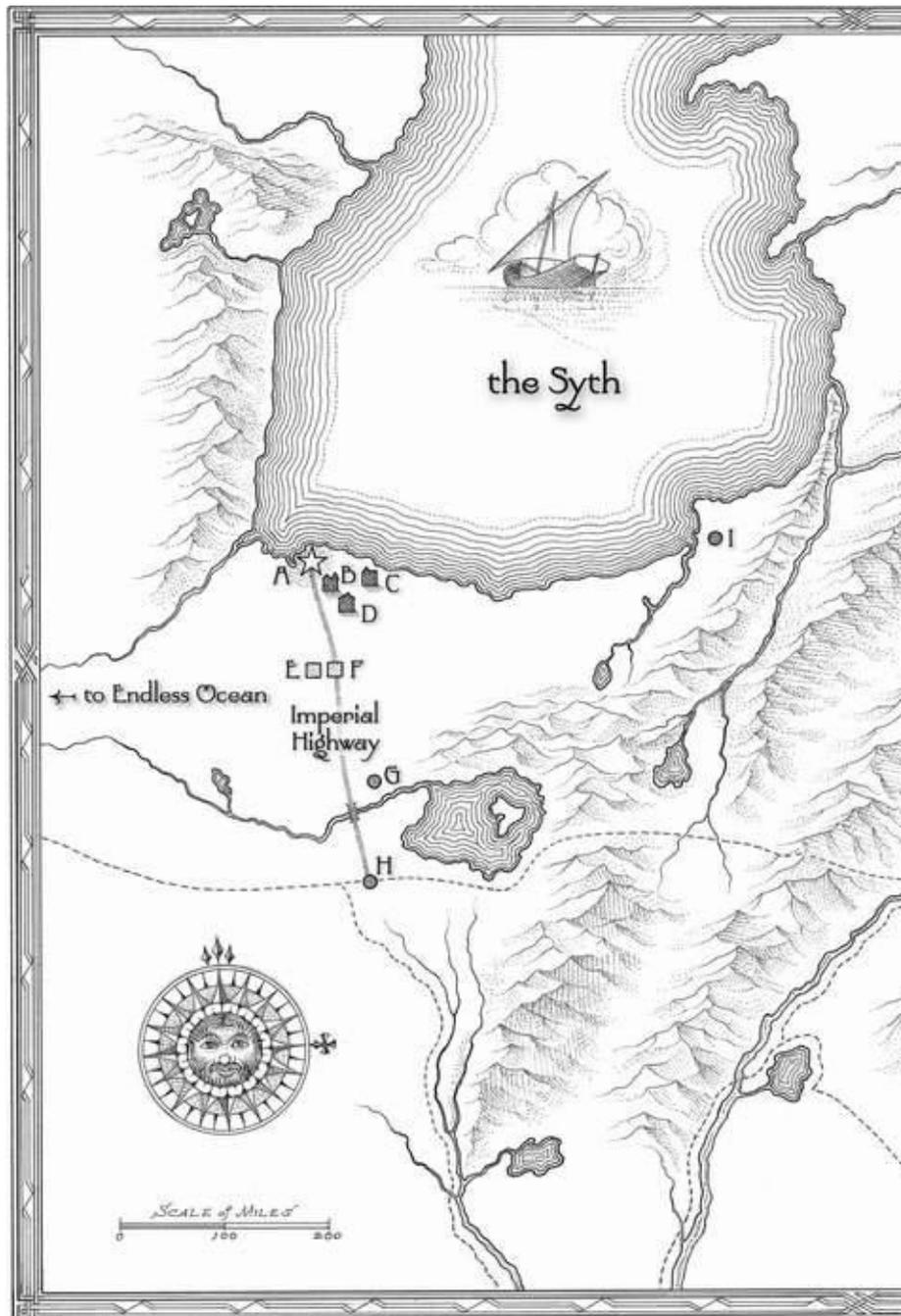
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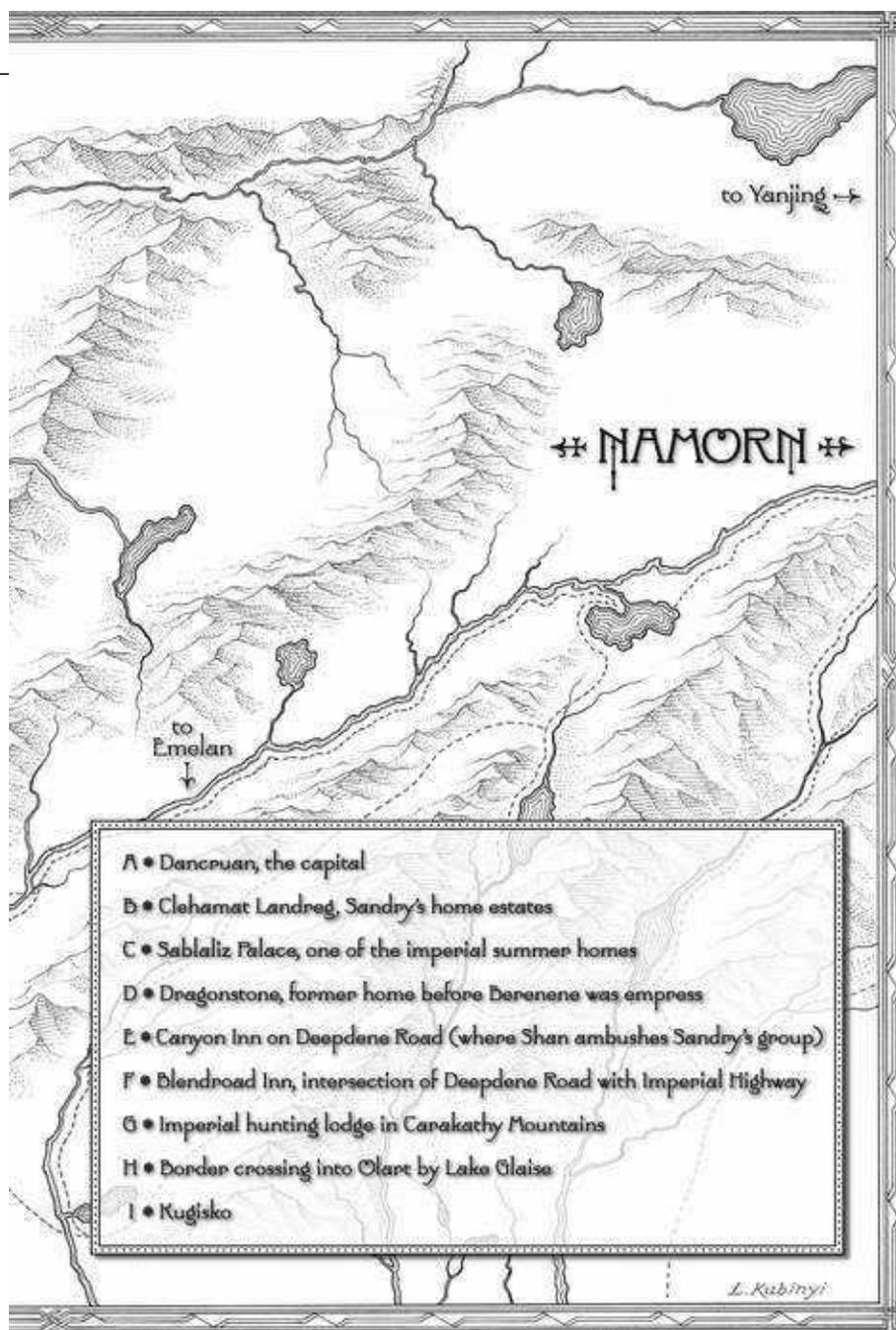
Calendar

January Wolf
February Storm
March Carp
April Seed
May Goose
June Rose
July Mead
August Wort
September Barley
October Blood
November Snow
December Hearth

Sunday, Moonsday, Starsday, Earthsday, Airsday, Firesday, Watersday

Maps





*The 12th day of Wort Moon
The year 1041 K. F. (after the Fall of the Kurchal Empire)
In the palace of Duke's Citadel, Summersea, Emelan*

Lady Sandrilene fa Toren sat in the room that was her study in her uncle's palace. In her hands she held a thread circle, one that included four lumps spaced equally apart. It was a symbol not just of her first magical working, but of the magical bond she shared with her foster-brother and two foster sisters, who had been away from home for many months. Today was Sandry's birthday, and she missed them. Once she could have reached out through their connection without even touching the thread, and spoken with them, magic to magic, but not in the last two years. They had traveled far beyond reach, into lands and experiences Sandry couldn't share.

"Daja at least should have been here," she said, and sniffed. "She was supposed to come home a year ago. But no. She wanted to see more of Capchen, and Olart—"

Someone knocked on her door. Sandry hid the circle under a fold of her skirt. "Come in, please," she called, her voice light and courteous.

A footman entered. He carried a parcel wrapped in oiled cloth and tied with ribbons secured by a large wax seal. "My lady, this has come for you," he said with a bow.

Sandry's mouth trembled. Her hope that the package might be from her brother or sister evaporated at the sight of its seal. Only Ambros fer Landreg sends packages like this to me, she thought, cross. No gifts or nice, long books and letters from *him*. Only dreary old accounts from my estates in Namorn.

"Please set it here," she ordered, patting her desk. The footman obeyed and left her alone with the parcel.

Other people get to have parties and presents and outings with their friends when they turn sixteen, Sandry reflected unhappily. *I* get another fat package of dry old reports about cherry crops and mule sales from Ambros.

I'm not being fair, she told herself. I know that. I also know I don't *want* to be fair.

Wearily, she gave the thread circle a last check, pressing each lump between her thumb and forefinger. Each one stood for a friend. Each was cool to the touch. The others were too far away for their presence to even register in the circle.

Sandry tucked the thread into the pouch around her neck and hid it under her clothes. She blinked away tears as she thought, *I was just fooling myself, hoping they'd be home by now.*

She returned her attention to the package. Ambros probably had no idea his tedious reports would arrive today, she reminded herself in her prudent cousin's defense, propping her chin on her hand. At Uncle Vedris and Baron Erdogan gave me presents at breakfast. There's to be a get-together with my Summersea friends tonight. I'm just being petty, sulking over this, too. But really, who wants to go over crop reports and tax documents on her birthday?

With bright, cornflower blue eyes set over a button nose, she stared longingly out of the open windows. Her pale skin still bore the light bronze tint it always picked up in the summer, just as her light brown hair, neatly braided and pinned in a coronet on her head, was gilded with sun streaks. Her cheeks were still girlishly plump, but any touch of youthful shyness those cheeks gave her face was offset by her round and mulish chin. Even at sixteen, Lady Sandrilene fa Toren knew her own mind.

She was dressed simply in a loose blue summer gown of her own weaving, sewing, and design, a gown that would never show a wrinkle or stain, no matter what she had done with her day. Sandry was a thread mage, with the right to practice as an adult. She tolerated no wayward behavior in any cloth in her presence. Her stockings never dared escape their garters, any more than her gowns dared to pick up dirt. Every woven scrap in Duke's Citadel had learned the girl's power since she had come to look after her great-uncle Vedris.

The day's fading, Sandry told herself. I should do *something* before dinner besides pout.

She thrust the bulky package aside.

"Do you know, the only time I ever see you shirk your duty is when Ambros's packages arrive." While Sandry daydreamed, Duke Vedris IV had come to stand in the study's open door. He leaned there, a fleshy-faced, powerfully built man in his mid-fifties, dressed in blue summer cotton of his own weaving and stitching. While his clothes were plain and his jewelry simple, there was no denying his aura of power and authority. No one would ever mistake him for a commoner. Neither would they mistake his obvious affection for the great-niece born of his wayward nephew and a wealthy young noblewoman from Namorn.

Sandry blushed. She hated for him to see her at any less than her best. "Uncle, he's so *prosy*," she explained, hearing the dreaded sound of a whine creep into her voice. "He goes on and on about bushels of rye per acre and gross lots of candles until I want to *scream*. Doesn't he understand I don't care?"

Vedris raised his brows. "But you care about the accounts for Duke's Citadel, which are just as thick with minutiae," he pointed out.

"Only so you won't," she retorted. When Vedris smiled, she had to fight a smile of her own. "You know what I mean, Uncle! If I don't stop you from worrying over every little detail, you might fry yourself into a second heart attack. At the rate Ambros goes on, *I'm* the one who will have a heart attack."

"Ah," said the duke. "So you need an altruistic reason to take an interest, rather than the selfish one that this is your own inheritance from your mother, and your own estates."

Sandry opened her mouth to protest, then closed it. Something about that sounds like he just turned it head over heels on me, she thought. I just can't put my finger on what.

"Very well, then," Vedris continued. "I submit that by looking so conscientiously after your affairs and his own—I know he has properties in his own right—it is quite possible your cousin Ambros courts a heart attack." He straightened. "Just because your Namornese inheritance is in land and in Namorn, is no reason for you to treat it lightly, my dear." He walked off down the hall.

Sandry put her hands up to cool her cheeks, which were hot with embarrassment. I've never gotten a scolding from him before, she thought with dismay. I don't care for it at all!

She glared at the ribbons on the package of documents. They struggled, then ripped free of the wax seal and flew apart. With a sigh, Sandry grasped the edges of the folded wrapping and began to remove it.

The 18th day of Blood Moon

The year 1041 K. F.

The Anderran/Emelan border

After several side trips following their original journey to Kugisko in Namorn, Dedicate Initiate Frostpine of Winding Circle temple and his student Daja Kisubo finally crossed back into Emelan. Although it was late in the year, the weather still held fine. The skies were a brilliant blue without

single cloud, the breeze crisp without being cold. Daja sighed happily.

~~“Another week and we’ll be home,” she commented, turning her broad, dark face up to the sun.~~ She was a big young woman with glossy brown skin, a wide mouth, and large, perceptive brown eyes. She wore her wiry black hair in masses of long, thin braids wrapped, coiled, and pinned at the back of her head, an elegant style that drew attention to the muscled column of her neck. Her traveling garments were light brown wool with orange patterns, sewn into a tunic and leggings in the style of her native people, the Traders. “I’ll be close enough to mind-speak with Sandry any day—well, I could now, but I’d have to strain to do it, and I’d rather wait. She’ll have a million questions, I know.”

Frostpine grinned. He was brown like Daja, but where her build was solid, his was wiry, his muscles cables that lined his long body. He wore his hair wild around a perfectly bald crown and kept his beard in the same exuberant style. His Fire dedicate’s crimson robes were every bit as travel worn as hers. “You can’t blame Sandry,” he pointed out. “We were supposed to be home the summer before this.”

“She’d have questions anyway,” Daja said comfortably. Before Sandry had moved to Duke’s Citadel, she had shared a house at Winding Circle with Daja and their other foster-brother and foster-sister, Briar and Tris. “She *always* has questions. Well, she’s going to have to come to Discipline for answers. I won’t spend forever mind-speaking, and once I get back in my own room, I’m not coming out for a week.”

Frostpine reined his horse up. “Discipline?”

Daja halted her own mount and turned to smile at her scatterbrained teacher. “Discipline cottage?” she asked, gently reminding him. “My foster-mother Lark? I live there when you’re not dragging me everywhere between the Syth and the Pebbled Sea?”

Frostpine ran a big hand through his flyaway hair. “Daja, how old are you?”

She rolled her eyes. “Sixteen,” she said even more patiently. “On the thirtieth of Seed Moon, the same day I mark for my birth every year.”

“I should have thought of it sooner,” he said mournfully. “But I swear, as I get older, the harder it gets to think...Daja, Winding Circle has rules.”

She waited, running a finger over the bright piece of brass that wrapped the palm and back of one hand. The metal was as warm and supple as living skin, a remnant of a forest fire, powerful magic, and Daja’s ill-fated second Trader staff.

Frostpine said, “You probably know the rule already, at least for most of the temple boarding students. At sixteen, they must take vows, pay for their boarding and classes, or leave. And only those who have not attended temple school as children may attend as paying adults.”

“Of course,” Daja said. “There’s a ceremony, and they give the residents of the dormitories papers to show they’ve studied at Winding Circle. But that’s not for Sandry or Briar or Tris or me. We aren’t temple students. We study with some temple dedicates, but not all of our teachers are temple. We live with Lark and Rosethorn at Discipline, not in the dormitories. And we’re proper mages. We’re—we’re different.”

Frostpine was shaking his head. “My dear, if you four still needed a firm education, we might be able to make a case, at least until you earned a medallion as the adult mages do,” he said quietly. “But the fact is that you have your mage’s medallion. As these things are measured, you were considered to be adult mages when you received them, fit to practice and to teach. Of course, you were too young to live on your own then. But now? Unless you are prepared to give your vows to the gods of the Living Circle, you will not be permitted to stay at Discipline.”

Daja put her hand on the front of her tunic. Under it, hanging on a cord around her neck, was the gold medallion that proved that the wearer was a true mage, certified by Winding Circle to practice magic as an adult. She, Sandry, Tris, and Briar had agreed not to show it until they were eighteen.

unless they had to prove they were accredited mages. It was almost unheard-of for one thirteen-year-old to receive it, let alone four. Their teachers had been careful to let them know they had gotten it not only because they were as powerful and controlled as adults. Possession of a medallion also meant they had to answer to the laws and governing mages of Winding Circle and the university Lightsbridge. "A leash," Briar had described it, "to prove to the law we won't run loose and pee on their bushes." Their teacher Niko had replied that his description was "crude, but accurate." Given the warning, and the fuss people made when they learned she had the medallion, Daja showed it as little as possible.

Frostpine bit his lip, then went on. "I can put you up over my forge for a week or two, but after that they'll make a fuss. You should be able to stay with Lark for a couple of nights, but she does have at least one new student living with her. Perhaps you could go to Sandry's?"

Daja was a smith, with intense bonds to fire, but for all that, she was normally slow to anger. Something in what he had said lit the tiniest of sparks. I don't know if he realizes it sounds like he wants me out of the way, she thought, heat tingling in her cheeks. Or like I can throw myself on my foster-sister's charity. Of course he didn't *mean* it to sound as if he wants me out of the way. Even so, we *have* been living in each other's pockets for longer than we'd first expected to. We didn't intend to stay so long in Olart, or Capchen, or Anderran. We didn't plan to spend a whole extra year and a half away after Namorn.

"Daja?" Frostpine asked hesitantly.

I can't look at him, she thought. I don't want to cry. I feel all...lost. Funny.

"We should get moving," she said, nudging her horse into motion. The sky remained cloudless but now the day felt gray. Her eagerness to go back had faded.

"Daja, please talk to me," Frostpine said. "You can stay with me or with Sandry. Frankly, I had expected you would want a house, perhaps even a forge, of your own, since you're of age. Certainly you can afford it. *You* haven't taken vows of poverty."

He's smiling at me—I can hear it in his voice, she thought. I should smile back, not worry him. But I feel empty. Lost, like when the Traders declared me outcast because I was the only survivor of that shipwreck. Why didn't Sandry warn me, all those letters she's been writing? She babbled of the duke's health and something or other Lark wove or she embroidered, but wrote no word of not being able to return to Discipline. Of course not. She has *family*. The duke, and her cousins in Namorn. But me...I'm cast out of my home. If I don't have Winding Circle, what do I have?

Briar and Tris will be in the same basket when they come home, Daja realized. They'll be outcasts, too.

I suppose my lady Sandrilene thought we'd be happy to live as poor relatives. She doesn't know what it's like, always being on the edge of homelessness. She'll expect us to be one cozy little family again, only living on her money, until she marries, or His Grace dies...And I'll be left with no home again.

Daja shook her head. It was all a mess, one she didn't want to discuss.

She forced herself to smile at Frostpine. "Where do we stop tonight?" she asked. "Let's worry about the other business when we're closer to Summersea, all right?"

The 26th day of Blood Moon

The year 1041 K. F.

Summersea, Emelan

The first visitor to the house and forge at Number 6 Cheeseman Street was Sandry. Daja could feel her

nearness through the magical connection they shared, though Daja's heart had been in such turmoil that she had refused to open that connection to speak to her foster-sister. Now, feeling both apprehensive and angry, she waited for the housemaid to show Sandry into her study.

Sandry thanked the maid and waited for her to leave before she turned on Daja. "I have to learn from your *teacher* that not only have you been in Emelan two weeks, but you went and bought a house of your own?"

Daja scowled at the shorter girl. "Spare me the ballads," she replied. "You knew very well I was close. I could hardly sleep for you bothering me to open my mind."

"Why didn't you let me in? Why didn't you tell me anything?" cried Sandry.

Daja had bottled up her feelings since Frostpine had said that the home she looked forward to was no longer home no longer. During the ride to Winding Circle and her reunion with her foster-mother Lark and her temple friends, Daja had shown a smooth and smiling face. She had quietly found a Summers house with a smith's forge already attached, then picked out furnishings so she could move in as soon as possible. To everyone—merchants, dedicantes, the old smith whose home she had bought, her new servants—she had pretended that setting up her own household was just what she had in mind.

She was tired of pretending. "Tell you that I was being cast out of Winding Circle because I no longer fit?" she asked quietly. "Tell you so you might offer me charity, or so His Grace might offer me charity? How long until *that* charity ran out, and I was left on my own again, Sandry? First I lost my family, then the Traders, then Winding Circle. I need my own place. A home no one can take from me."

Sandry's lips trembled. "So you cast *me* out. You said I was your *saati*." A *saati* was a true friend of the heart, someone who was trusted without reserve. "I thought the friendship of *saatis* lasted forever."

"But first I need to heal. I can't have you picking and prying and worrying inside my mind," Daja said, her face and voice still under control. "I need to tend to myself." Her voice rose slightly. "You didn't even warn me. You've been to Discipline. Did anyone ever say, well, you're sixteen, you can move back here even if you wish?"

Sandry's chin trembled. "I thought you'd want to live with Uncle and me. I thought we'd *all* be happy to live at Duke's Citadel."

"He's not getting any younger," Daja said cruelly. "One day he'll die and then his heir will kick us out. No, thanks. Now I have it. As long as I have it, Briar and Tris and even you will have a home nobody can make us leave."

Sandry sniffed, then defiantly blew her nose on a handkerchief. "Couldn't *you* throw *us* out?" she demanded angrily.

"No more than I could break that precious thread circle you made when you spun the four of us into one," Daja said. "You know, sometimes I wish that earthquake had never happened. That you'd never had to spin us together to make us stronger. Maybe I wouldn't hurt so much now if I hadn't expected you to know me as well as *I* know me. If I hadn't expected you to know how awful it would feel to lose Discipline cottage!"

"So you punish me by not letting me into your mind. Fine," Sandry retorted. "Sulk. Never mind that you three all left me here—"

"You *said* we should travel!" Daja reminded her. "You *said* we ought to go!"

"You never once stopped to ask if I didn't just say it because you all wanted to go so badly!" Sandry balled her hands into fists. "Not one of you even suggested it wasn't fair that you *all* go. You just said, oh, good, thanks, Sandry old girl, we'll bring you presents from abroad, and off you went! Well, fine! Welcome home, keep your presents, and if you want to talk, you can do it by letter, or in person. You're not the only one who can shut people out, you know!" She turned on her heel to make

grand exit, then hesitated, and turned around again. “And Uncle invites you to supper tomorrow night at six.”

Daja blinked, startled at the abrupt turn in the conversation, then nodded.

“Fine!” Sandry cried, and walked out.

Daja rubbed her temples. Welcome home, she thought wearily. Everything’s changed, you just upset your sister-*saati*, nothing feels right, welcome home.

The 1st day of Rose Moon, 1042 K. F.

Number 6 Cheeseman Street

Summersea, Emelan

Trisana Chandler’s head still ached as she followed the cart that held her luggage down Cheeseman Street. She had spent a hard few days since her return home. Turning her very young student, Glaki, over to Tris’s foster-mother Lark for a proper rearing at Winding Circle had been hard. Tris would never admit it, but she was deeply touched by Glaki’s tears when she learned that Tris could only visit, not live with, her. It had also hurt to leave her dog, Little Bear, with Glaki and Lark. Tris and Little Bear had been Glaki’s family since the child’s mother died—it would have been cruel to take away both, and Tris knew it. At least Glaki had adjusted to the loss of Tris’s teacher. Niko had interacted with Glaki when necessary, but it was Tris and Little Bear who had played with her, washed her, heard her lessons, and borne the results when Glaki’s first magic lessons did not go as planned.

Tris would have found those adjustments hard enough. She had prepared for them all the way home. What she had not prepared for was the effect of a busy harbor city and a busy temple city on her ability to read images carried on the wind. When she had started out to learn it, Tris had been lucky to see any vision for more than a blink of an eye. In the two years of study she had put into it, Tris had only improved the clarity and duration of the images slightly, averaging one or two images per trial. Over the long weeks of her voyage north, constant practice and fewer images to sort through had left Tris open. A flood of far sharper visions assaulted her as their vessel entered Summersea harbor. She had felt the kiss of the ship against the dock while she vomited over the rail. Glaki and the dog had helped her off. Now Tris walked behind the luggage cart, using it as a wind and image barrier, to keep her unhappy stomach from rebelling anymore.

Tris did not look like someone who had already mastered magics that had defeated older, more experienced mages. A short, plump redhead, Tris wore a variety of braids coiled in a heavy silk net pinned at the back of her head. Only two thin braids were allowed to swing free, framing a face that was sharp-featured, long-nosed, and obstinate. Next to her hair, her storm gray eyes were her most attractive feature. Today she hid them behind dark blue tinted spectacles that cut the flood of pictures riding every draft. She was pale-skinned and lightly freckled, dressed for summer in a gray gown and dusty, well-worn boots. On her shoulder rode some kind of glass creature that sat on its hind feet, one delicate forepaw clutching one of her braids.

“Don’t hold on so tight,” Tris told the creature in a whispered croak. Her throat was raw from constant nausea. It had taken her three days in bed to keep her improved magical skill from making her sick. “They’ll love you. Everyone loves you. At least, they’ll love you if you don’t go around eating their expensive powders and things.”

The glass creature unfolded shimmering wings to balance, revealing itself to be a glass dragon. It voiced a chinking sound like the ring of pure crystal.

“No, you hardly ever mean it,” replied Tris. While she couldn’t exactly understand the creature, she had named Chime, they’d had this conversation before. “But you always eat anything that looks

like it might color your flames, and then you vomit most of it up.”

~~Though the luggage driver turned the cart through the gate of Number 6, Tris lagged behind~~ feeling anxious about seeing her sisters again. Just remember all those southern mages who found out I could see a little, or hear a little, on the winds, she reminded herself. How they acted as if I had stolen something from them—as if I *would* steal! How they kept saying I thought myself better than them, when I was trying not to throw up from the headaches. How they started hiding their notes and closing their doors as I came by. Do I want Sandry and Daja to change like that on me? Do I want them deciding I think I’m better than they are, just because I can do a special trick?

It wasn’t so bad when I started out, she thought, forcing herself to go through that gate. When people didn’t know. But then it got out that time I knew Glaki had fallen and broken her arm. After that they all decided I was going to lord it over them.

She looked at the house. Two young women, one black, one white, were coming toward her. One was in a smith’s apron; one was dressed like a noble. Both were wearing smiles as uncertain as the one on Tris’s mouth. Tris halted, frowning. For a moment these two were strangers, smooth and polished creatures who moved as if they were sure of themselves. Behind them stood a three-story house with neatly planted garden strips in front, good ironwork around the windows, and sturdy outbuildings on either side. Even the location was expensive.

They look like the world is theirs, she thought bleakly, rocking back on the worn heels of her boots. And isn’t it? Daja could afford this house, from all her work in living metal. Sandry’s rich. When Briar comes back—if he comes back—he’ll be rich, too, from working with miniature trees. I’m the poor one. I’ll never belong here like they do.

“I’ll be your housekeeper, Daja,” she said abruptly. “Not a charity case. I’ll earn my keep.”

Sandry and Daja looked at each other. Suddenly they—and the look of exasperation they shared—were very familiar.

“Same old Tris,” they chorused.

Tris scowled. “I mean it.”

Sandry came forward to kiss Tris’s cheek. “We know. Oh, dear—you’re clammy. And your color’s dreadful. Lark wrote you’ve been ill. Come—” Her blue eyes flew wide open as Chime stood up on Tris’s shoulder and made a sound of glass grating on glass.

“Hello, beautiful,” said Daja, holding out both hands. “You must be Chime.”

The glass dragon glided over to land in Daja’s hands.

“Traitor,” grumbled Tris. She let Sandry wrap an arm around her shoulders. “Actually, I would feel better for some tea,” she admitted.

Daja led the way indoors, cooing admiration of Chime.

The 25th day of Storm Moon, 1043 K. F.

Discipline cottage

Winding Circle temple, Emelan

At first Briar Moss’s homecoming was grand. Lark worked her welcoming magic on all of them, erasing lines from Rosethorn’s face that Briar had thought would never go away, and making Evvy feel as welcome as if she were Lark’s own daughter. Lark barely hesitated on meeting Evvy’s strange friend Luvo before she found him the ideal place to sit and watch them all. Briar she saluted, letting him know that he had finally brought them all home safe. At that moment it didn’t seem to matter that Tris had left a new student with Lark, or that another student, a fellow so shy he didn’t want to share the attic with anyone, lived upstairs. All that mattered to Briar was that he was safe at Discipline, that

Little Bear still remembered him, that Rosethorn seemed more like her old self than she'd been since they'd reached the far east. Even the sight of temple habits—Earth green here at Discipline; Fire red there at Air yellow, Water blue, novice white on the spiral road—didn't rattle him. This was Emelan, not Gyongxe. Outside the walls he could hear the crash of the sea in the cove and the cry of gulls overhead. Briar was home, and safe.

The first problem came when Rosethorn told him that he could sleep in her room for his few nights at Discipline. She would stay with Lark for the present. The child Glaki had Briar's old room. There was no question of sharing the attic with the ferociously shy Comas. It felt strange, lying down in Rosethorn's small, neat chamber, but it was only temporary. Since they picked up Sandry's letter when they made port in Hatar, Briar had known that things had changed. It was just as well, he thought then. He couldn't live as he did these days in a small temple cottage, under Lark and Rosethorn's far-too-perceptive eyes.

Rosethorn's bed was just not comfortable. It was a dedicate's hard cot, not luxurious by anyone's standard, but Briar was not used to even its mite of softness. With mental apologies to Rosethorn, and a promise to restore the room later, Briar moved the pallet to the floor. That was better, but when had Discipline gotten so noisy? The attic floor creaked—was that fellow up there *rolling* to and fro? Briar couldn't remember if the clock in the Hub tower had ever woken him before. Then he could swear he could hear the dog snoring from Glaki's room.

It was also stuffy. Who could breathe in here?

At last he found his bedroll and crept out the back door, into the garden. It was cold, for Emelan in wintertime around the Pebbled Sea, but Briar's roll was made for Gyongxe winters. It was more than adequate for a night without rain, even in Storm Moon. He laid it out on the garden path and slipped between the covers, plants and vines in full slumber all around him. He was asleep the moment he pulled the blankets up around his chin.

He heard the chime of temple bells, summoning Earth temple dedicates to the midnight service that honored their gods. As he fell back into his dreams, flames roared up around him, throwing nightmare shadows on his eyelids. In the distance, triumphant warriors shouted and people shrieked. The wind carried the scent of blood and smoke to his nostrils.

Burning carpets wrapped around him. Briar fought to get free while boulders shot from catapults smashed temple walls to rubble.

Briar gasped and sat up. Sweat poured over his face, stinging in his eyes. He'd ripped his bedroll apart in his struggles, flinging blankets into the winter garden. Shuddering, he gulped in lungfuls of cold air, trying to cleanse his nose and throat of the lingering reek of burning wood and bodies. As his head cleared, he drew up his knees and wrapped his arms around them. Resting his face against his legs, he began to cry.

"It was the bell for services, wasn't it?" Rosethorn was hunkered down close by, a shadow among shadows. She spoke with a trace of a slur.

Briar scrubbed his face on his knees before he looked up. "Bells?" he asked.

Rosethorn had her own share of bad dreams from the last two years. "You slept fine on the ship with hardly any nightmares. But now you're in temple walls, surrounded by temple sounds, including the calls to midnight service. It started the dreams again. You won't even be able to stay here a few days, will you?"

If she was anyone else, maybe I'd lie, Briar thought. But she was there. She knows. "I jump just seeing all the different color robes," he said wearily. "Doesn't matter that the folk here are different races for the most part. We even use the same kind of incense they did back there." He shrugged. "Evvy will be all right," he said. "Once the stone mages here start teaching her, she'll be busy. And I'll be around." Briar sighed. "So I'll tell her when she gets up. I'll see tomorrow if Daja's got room."

for me.”

Rosethorn got to her feet with a wince and offered Briar a hand. “I doubt that Daja would write say she has a floor of the house opening onto the garden set aside for you if she didn’t mean for you live there,” she said dryly as she helped him to his feet. “And Briar, if the dreams don’t stop, you should see a soul-healer about them.”

Briar shrugged impatiently and picked up his things. “They’re just *dreams*, Rosethorn.”

“But you see and hear things sometimes, and smell things that aren’t there. You’re jumpy and irritable,” Rosethorn pointed out.

When Briar glared at her, she shrugged, too. “I’m the same. I don’t mean to put it off. Terrible events have long-lasting effects, boy. They can poison our lives.”

“I won’t let them,” Briar said, his voice harsh. “That’s one victory the Yanjing emperor *doesn’t* get.”

Folding blankets over her arm, Rosethorn looked at him. “There’s something I don’t understand,” she remarked abruptly. “We’re having a perfectly clear conversation right now. Before we journeyed east, if I wanted to talk to you, I would have to slip every word in between five or six from the girls in your mind. The four of you were always talking.” She tapped her forehead with a finger to indicate what she meant. “Now, all your attention is right here. And another thing. Why weren’t they on our doorstep the moment we came home? Tris and Daja are back; Lark said as much. Did you tell them not to come? You aren’t the only one who would like to see them, you know.”

“I’m not speaking with them,” Briar muttered, avoiding her gaze. “Not in my mind. I didn’t tell them we’re coming, or we’re here.”

Rosethorn’s eyebrows snapped together. “You haven’t linked back up with the girls? In Mila’s name, why not? They could help you so much better than I can!”

Briar stared at her. Had Rosethorn run mad? “*Help* me? Boo-hoo and wail and drape themselves all over me and treat me as if I was a refugee, more like!” he said tartly. “Want me to *talk* about how like talking pays for anything, and cuddle me, and cosset me!”

Rosethorn’s delicate mouth curled in her familiar sarcastic curve. “Did some imperial Yanjing brute knock you on the head ten or twelve times?” she wanted to know. “That doesn’t sound like our girls. If you’ve shut them out for that reason, boy, you took more of a beating than I guessed.”

Briar hung his head and ground his teeth. Why does Rosethorn always have to cut through all that smoke screen I put up? he asked himself. It’s unnatural, the way she knows my mind. He steeled himself to say the truth: “I don’t want them in my mind, seeing what I saw. Hearing what I heard. Smelling...I don’t want them knowing the things I did.” Sure of Rosethorn’s next objection, he quickly added, “And I don’t know if I can hide that away from them once they get in. It’s everywhere. Rosethorn. All that mess. My head’s a charnel house. I have no way of cleaning it up yet.”

To his surprise, Rosethorn had no answer to that but to hug him tight, blankets and all. After a moment’s hesitation, he hugged her back. With Rosethorn, hugging was all right. She had been like Gyongxe, too.

*The 26th day of Storm Moon, 1043 K. F.
Market Street to Number 6 Cheeseman Street
Summersea, Emelan*

As a way to build up her defenses against being overwhelmed by sights on the wind, Tris had begun her journey farther afield in her marketing, controlling the drafts that touched her face and the images she chose to inspect. On this day she had offered to go to Rainen Alley to buy Daja’s metal polish.

meant she would take Market Street on the way home, spending three blocks on a direct line with the East Gate, able to catch whatever wind came through.

She had barely stepped into that wind when it showered her with pictures. She walked along discarding or ignoring most as useless, dull, or meaningless, until a solid one gleaming with the silver fire of pure magic brought her to a complete halt.

A young man five feet nine inches tall walked through the slums beyond the East Gate, leading a pack-laden donkey. Atop its more usual burdens the donkey carried boxes with an assortment of *shakkans*, or miniature trees. The young man was a handsome fellow with bronze skin, broad shoulders, and glossy black hair that he wore cropped an inch long. His eyes were gray-green, turning a darker green as he returned the admiring glances of the women who passed him by. Those eyes were set over a thin blade of a nose, a sensitive mouth, and a firm chin. He wore a Yanjing-style round-collared coat and leggings in tree green, and rough leather boots with fleece linings. A close examination revealed what looked like flower tattoos covering his hands. Very close examination showed that the flowers lay under the young man's skin and nails. They also moved, grew, put out leaves, and blossomed.

Tris immediately changed course. If she hurried, she could have a batch of Briar's favorite spice cookies in the oven when he reached the house.

That night Tris set the dining room table for four. Daja walked in as Tris laid out plates of olives and warm, fresh bread.

"What, no wine?" asked Daja. She was still wet from scrubbing her face and hands after a day at the forge. She carried the tang of hot metal around her like perfume.

Tris raised nearly invisible eyebrows. In here, with more control and fewer drafts, she wore her clear spectacles. "You drink it?" she asked, skeptical. "You never did before."

Daja shrugged. "I just thought, you being all fancy with fresh bread..." She peered inside the pitcher, nodded, and poured out cider for herself. "No, you know wine meddles with my magic. But maybe Briar can drink it."

"Maybe time runs backwards," Tris called over her shoulder as she went back into the kitchen. With practiced skill she collected the roasted chicken stuffed with dried fruits, a plate of cheese pastries shaped like small pots, and a bowl of leeks cooked with eggs. The foods had all been among Briar's favorites when the four had lived at Discipline.

It seemed Daja had remembered Briar's fondness for pomegranate juice, since she had filled her cup with that. "Hakkoi pound it, do you want us to roll away from the table?" she asked, amused. Tris set down the food.

Tris scowled at her. "He's too skinny, if you didn't notice," she said tartly. "What was he eating all this time, leaves?"

"No, there were some grubs, too." Briar leaned against the door, watching Tris. "Daj', what are you're too cheap to hire a cook?"

Tris stuck her tongue out at him—as if she would let a hired cook fix his favorite dishes!—and returned to the kitchen. Going to answer a knock on the door she heard Daja say, "My cook left three days after Tris moved in. I have a kitchen maid who helps during the day, and I'll need to hire a second housemaid. Whom you're under strict orders not to frighten," she called after Tris.

"Not if she does the work right," muttered Tris. She opened the kitchen door to find Sandra wrapped in an oiled cloak against icy rain. "Why couldn't you come in the front like a civilized person?" Tris asked as she let the other girl in. "And wipe your feet. Don't tell me you walked from Duke's Citadel."

"No, but your manservant's showing my guards where to stable the horses, and this was easier

Sandry replied quietly. She let Tris take her cloak and hat. "Is he here? I thought so, but he's closing me out, just like you and Daja."

"And you're wide open, are you?" Tris asked, hanging the dripping clothes on pegs. "Yes, he's here. And my supper is getting cold."

Sandry turned up her small nose and sniffed the air. "I smell fresh bread," she said happily. "Have you headache tea? I've been reading dull old reports from Namorn all day."

"I'll make you a cup. Go say hello to him," Tris urged. "How could you be doing reports? No mail comes from Namorn this time of year."

"Uncle suggested it. He thinks it's wise to do a review of the last three or four years all at once to see what's changed. I know he's right, it's just so tedious."

"I thought it was you," said Daja from the doorway. "Didn't you come here to say hello to our boy, not talk about reports?"

Sandry looked past her and saw Briar. "Oh, you're so *thin*," she said mournfully, and walked past Daja with her arms held out.

Tris poured the tea water, noticing that her hand on the grip of the pot trembled. It's all wrong, she told herself. We should be in Discipline, with the kitchen and the table all in one room, and Lar and Rosethorn... Stop it! she ordered herself tartly. She put down the teapot and slid her fingers behind her spectacles to wipe away tears. When she could see again, Daja had taken charge of the teapot.

"Things change," Daja said softly. "We change with them. We sail before the wind. We become adults. As adults, we keep our minds and our secrets hidden, and our wounds. It's safer."

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