

Chapter 4

I didn't want to die.

I did some fast but simple thinking in the seconds while falling.

I didn't want to die.

I had nothing else. I didn't know what I wanted to live for now that everything had ended. I didn't know what I would do. I didn't know where I mattered or to whom.

I didn't want to die.

But that was enough.

I fell from the high tower toward the river below and thought of rivers.

The River Alph had three daughters: Astras, Aelof, and Azenath. Astras you've met. Aelof never really left home. A high aqueduct met the Hundred Ribbons falls as the Alph came over the ringwall, and siphoned a small stream away. This stream, Aelof, ran across the arch that connected the Hakan to the wall, and once within the Hakan, drove wheels and turned vanes to power the city. When I'd first come to Shang Du on an errand, she and I had been introduced while I was waiting for Koru. Within thirty seconds, she was lamenting how much harder she worked than anyone else and how no one else helped. She did and nor did anyone else help, but we'd just met and I didn't really want to hear about it. After doing all the work in this place, her words, the river vented through a hundred-headed rat sculpture on the south side of the pillar.

Azenath or Zeni, left her father shortly after Hundred Ribbons. An oxbow of the river branched off and filled a narrow, deep fault between black basalt and pale granite. The fault's shape resembled a funnel. A stairway carved into the fault spiraled down until being lost in deep shadows. One could walk down the spiral until exiting to the other place and there read the meaning of dreams. Koru had bragged about it when giving me the tour.

I'd met Zeni last night. The river carried a great deal of brown silt, but by moonlight, the pool had cleared. I could see the stairway descending across white and black stone until it met the reflection of the moon and there vanished. She'd worn gossamer and spider silk, waited at a platform round as the moon itself, sitting on a round bench around a round pit, everything pocked with black shadows against white marble. There was no marble in the earth around

Shang Du. We'd talked for a long time, but my dreams had been full of glory and thunder. She'd had little to say.

I was going to hit the Aelof's outflow.

In my second year of Northshore, after I'd dropped out of my Sorcery major but before I'd started Unarmed Combat, a rumor had circulated that if you spoke Obesis at exactly the right moment, you could fall from any height and live. Right as you hit the ground, provided you were falling feet first, you could ghost-step onto the ground and walk away. Everyone knew someone who knew someone who had done it. A freshman had tried.

He died.

The faculty brought everyone together and explained you can't actually do that. Hitting the ground happens really, really fast, hence the problem, so speaking Obesis at exactly the right time is basically impossible. Furthermore, that isn't really what Obesis does. Obesis lets you stand on things, not survive getting hit by them at terminal velocity. I felt badly for the kid. We hadn't been friends, but I'd known him. He rode a skateboard. His name was something Unnish, Franz or Frens.

I hit the Aelof's outflow, and it was more like a thick mist than a waterfall. It rumbled but didn't roar. I spoke Obesis as my foot found a trickle of falling water.

The impact wrenched my foot. My knees felt like breaking. My foot plowed through the stream, throwing dovetails, and I stepped onto them, shouting Obesis again with more power. My other foot went sideways beneath me, and the knee did break. The mist fell thick, and the spray made rainbows. I inhaled to try again, hoping to land on the mist itself when I hit the water.

The water of Alph, even in a deep pool with the surface agitated by the Aelof's outflow, hit like nothing else. I've never eaten canvas on the mats like that. It was getting hit with everything, all at once, and there was nothing to slap or break-fall.

And then I was underwater in the dark, and I couldn't breathe, but at least I had been inhaling to yell so I had good air in my lungs. My head was foggy. I couldn't figure out why I was floating but felt like I was going down. The world was dark, and the black rocky bottom of the pool looked the same as shadows.

The brain-machinery started clicking again, and the first thought in line for processing was 'Pain and death, that hurt!'

The second was 'Swim sideways, then up.'

That was more useful.

I broke the surface, breathed, and groaned. "Oh, wow. Oh, wow." Oh, that hurt. But the pool seemed still outside the falls, deep in the Alph's canyon. The black rock of the valley floor reached together overhead. I couldn't see the silvered domes of Koru's palace. Spirals of bubbles turned lazily on the water surface like the river spiraled about the valley floor, and they spun me in gentle circles. I tended distinctly toward one side.

The canyon was more of a series of connected pits than a single long trench, and at the end of it, the Alph vanished under the Hakan, a drop from which no one or no thing returned. This one place in the valley held none of Koru's children. Rats can't make it out once they are taken by Astras, the final plunge at Alph's end, and I think I've mentioned that rats are strong swimmers. I wasn't. I paddled to the side, found a bit of ledge, and slithered out.

I felt terrible. Oh, biscuits.

But I lived.

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Several long, circuitous miles of crawling on hands and one knee brought me to Zeni's oxbow. Her father had not appeared in flesh or foam. That had worried me, for the rats that did not see me avoided this place because they feared his drowning grip. Alph served Koru in exchange for being fed. Yet the river did not take form nor reach out to drag me down. I thought of so many reasons he should or shouldn't be gone that I realized I was thinking in circles. I crawled in circles too as Alph spiraled in, and when I crawled up-stream, I spiraled out until I came to Zeni's branch. The trip consisted of unpleasantness that cannot be described. Yet we had feasted on honeydew and ambrosia to watch the killing, and now, I endured.

The Sun set, the Moon rose, and I crawled to her pool and down. The winding stairway lead around and around, and I could breathe the water as if it was air. Soon I met her as she climbed to greet her visitor, and she greeted me like an old friend.

"Stop bleeding on my stairs!"

"We're underwater!"

"So?" she demanded.

"Let the water wash it off." I waved a hand.

"Who do you think the water is?" asked Azenath in a tone that didn't imply she wanted a response.

When I need help with the ladies, a little sex appeal always gets me through. If that doesn't work, I try flattery. If that didn't work, I'd need a desperate plan C.

"Oh lady Azenath, fairest and most beautiful of your sisters-" I paused to think of something to say next.

"Yes," she replied.

I hesitated.

She waited.

Boils and blisters on plan C. "Since I met you, I have thought of no one else."

"Good."

"You have stolen my heart. I yearn for you. My eyes see nothing but your face, and the blood in my veins beats to your name."

"I do that to people."

She smiled, facing upward at a slight angle, nodded, and waited.

"My love, I need your help."

Azenath snorted. She made bubbles. "Oh, there it is. Why would you bring that in? You were doing so well."

"It's my leg."

"I don't care about your leg. Talk more about me."

"You're probably right. It's for the best you don't cure my leg, for if I could run, I would chase you, catch you, carry you down to the bier in the pool's dark nethers, and have my way with you."

Azenath stopped scowling at the distant sky. She looked down. "What now?"

"I dare not say it again."

"Oh, you should."

"It's my leg."

She licked her lips and stretched her eyebrows. "What's wrong with it?"

"Technically speaking, it's broken."

"I can see that. You've got bones sticking out."

"You did ask."

"Don't get fresh."

"I'm trying to get fresh. That's why I'm here!" I insisted. "If you cure my leg, I'm going to get even more fresh, and that's something too impure to be conceived."

Azenath cocked her head sideways but did not immediately reply. Nor did she cure my leg. She was a river-goddess in her place of power, so I wasn't asking for the Moon here.

"Besides, it would be wicked. Your father wouldn't approve."

She shook her head. "He's not here. Koru sent him off for something."

Interesting. It explained why I'd survived, but I'd been involved in every step of planning the attempt, and Alph didn't have any part that I knew of. Koru couldn't have sent Alph out already. There was no time. That meant Koru had sent Alph out before. I couldn't guess why.

I could guess I was about to lose consciousness.

"Zeni, may I tell you how beautiful you are?"

"Please do."

"Your face is like--" and I dropped like a bag of soup.

Blissful, perfectly-timed unconsciousness. That's the secret to women. Say enough to get them interested, then pass out.