

Chapter 3

Black domes of the Agmar Shinoen rise north of the lake, and in the low spots between them lays deep clay soil. The rocky hills stand bare, long since washed clean. The stone is a dark mishmash of crystals, sparkly in the right light with all the grains smashing up against each other. South and east grow the trees of the Arsae, and the ground falls off cliffs to the depths of the tree ocean.

Slightly inland, pinched between the trees and mountains, the lake of the Hyades fills a deep crevice in the rocky ground, looking something like a capital T with the foot pointed south. North from where the foot hits the crossbar a double-spur of gray-brown mountains forms the Trough, a wide, fat-bellied hanging valley between two folded ridges. The Trough winds north and upwards into the high Doon plateau like a highway, and Kageran stands in its mouth., where the fast, cold river Aph has cut a small canyon, between the two Weeping Women who hold back the mountains.

The Weeping Women are tall figures of the same rock as the Agmar ground, whose upper bodies emerge from the lake with their backs to the mountains, and all the gray earth of those folded ridges piling up behind them. They're crude, rough sculptures, if sculptures they are. The one on the east, Shanna, has a split butte of stone in front of her, giving the impression of two elbows sticking out like she's got her face in her hands. A coarse, hanging curtain of stone tumbles around her face. Anna, on the west, is a little more refined. Her left arm is thrown back and out, pointing towards the city, and her right is clearly bent in front of her head with her face in the pocket of her elbow. Shanna requires a little visualization to make her look like a person, but Anna has a clear bust, waist, and hips that meet the black water.

The city fills the valley mouth. The Trough opens up a rocky scarp, maybe two hundred feet tall and leaning back at a quarter angle. There's a toll road full of switchbacks. Where the Aph falls over the scarp, a great watermill sits at the heart of Gormen Manor. There Baroness Alyssa lives. The road hits the top of the scarp and ceases its switchbacks to run mostly straight up the Trough, and from it spread a hundred lesser roads and

streets. On the other side, almost at Anna's hand, there's a bit of cliff missing like some giant took a bite out of the edge. Within the Trough, north of the city, the ground is rich and loamy.

Before the Aph falls through the waterwheels, plunging down through a raucous canyon to fill the Hyades and later to plunge into the Arsae, it flows a wiggly line down the Trough. Along it runs a road cut into the canyon wall, and on the road come the Doonish people. They're a thick-bodied, dark-skinned people with sure feet. Men grow thin facial hair, but both men and women wear their head hair long, often braided intricately. They delight in complex colors on their clothing, wearing hats of braided ribbons. As a group they smile often.

New to the Doon are settlers from Ashirak, come up the great canyon city and spreading through the southern valleys. Those valleys are higher than mountains in other parts of the world. The newcomers are like many of the Ashirai, fair-skinned and tall, but not as tall as their lowland cousins. Nor are they as cheerful as their Doonish neighbors. They don't wear the colors nor the grins.

Another path to Kageran is the low route, the Emperor's Gateway that runs from Dylath-Leen on the Begah Bay to here in the shadow of the Doon Escarpment. Along that way lie the domain of a hundred warlords who call their bands 'consequences', such as the Consequence of Thalgo or the Consequence of Mayhar. Few of the Ashirai come that way. It is said that the consequent warlords are horned giants, and they've found a way to achieve the power of monsters by eating humans. Satre would know better than I, if the rumors are true. There aren't many of the Ashirai lowlanders, but I saw a few. They look like taller versions of their uplander cousins.

From sunken Meom came the Meomassa, carrying a history of doom and suffering. Two hundred years ago they spoke a blasphemy no one will repeat, and volcanoes erupted across their isles. In fury, they spoke worse blasphemies to condemn the gods who sent the volcanoes. Their islands sank, their home was destroyed, and the survivors washed up on the Ungale Ngalnak beaches, where they were eaten by the horned lords. Some found their way here. Their

skins are dark as dried lava. While the old-mountain Doonish wear linens spiced up with ribbons and threads, the Meomassa will make a whole dress out of a bolt of vivid red fabric and accent it with a shawl of yellow or green.

I hear ships can drop anchor at Meom and find bits of old wood in their anchor chains. Divers can see the dim shapes of huge mountains under a dark and cloudy sea. Sometimes the ocean bubbles. I've never been there.

Kageran had Celephians, of course. Wherever there was money were Celephians. They're a mixed people of their own, having few common features. As I entered the gates of Kageran, I saw them mucking out stables and gutting fish, arguing over prices in the market, and waiting in lines for gate access. I did see a few rich ones. A man on a black stallion wore silk and held scented lace to his nose. He looked at the world like he owned it while his horse shat on a non-rich Celephian groom.

And the people of Kageran seemed like the mixed-grain rock of their city, except where the rocks did their job in silence, the people yelled, argued, fought, and I think I saw someone get stabbed.

The toll road opened in Duncton's Quarter, and Trui lived in the Baroness's Quarter. I paid the toll on the roadway and gave someone else a copper for directions. I found my way over and inquired.

Hyrma Trui had had an attack and might die. Apparently his drinking had caught up with him. His brother Lemrai would take my options off my hands for the same price, but he was at Gormen Manor now, doing something or other with the royals.

Remember how I said Kageran has a baroness? As best I understand it, the last king of Kageran, Ozymandias, cut a deal with the Ashirai Emperor for military protection. In exchange Kageran joined the empire and the king took a demotion to baron. The locals think they were robbed. Among them, their rulers are still

royal to the point the twins Van and Mandrake call themselves House Royal.

They also say Ozymandias lived for thousands of years before being assassinated a few years ago, which touched off the Disagreement. I don't know too much about all that. I know the objective facts that Alyssa is the youngest and she rules the city, her older brother Duncton doesn't, and the eldest siblings, the Van and Mandrake, don't either. The twins were not born in wedlock, nor were two other siblings, Ducarte and Kyria. Ducarte and Kyria were born between the twins and Duncton, and they were missing or dead.

A polite woman met me at the door to Gormen Manor and brought me to Alyssa's office. Satre introduced himself at the door. He was a big man in mail with an equally polite and bored expression. He had curly black hair, a big aquiline nose, and a wide chin.

"Satre, Baron-Consort of Kageran," he said, clicking his heels together and nodding in the faintest insinuation of a bow. He spoke Celephian.

"Astrologamage Elegy," I replied in the same. I'd made the title up because I'd needed something for the elves, but I figured I'd stick to it now. I bowed a little deeper than he had.

"Good," he said. "And you are?"

Didn't I just...oh, right.

"I'm here to see Lemrai Trui. I made a deal with his brother for wheat options, so I'm looking for him now."

"A moment." He turned in the doorway. "Lemrai, do you know an astrologamage?"

"No," said a thin, confused voice.

"She says she's got some wheat options for you."

"Oh, her! Yes!" Someone jumped up, a chair scraped back, and rapid footsteps approached the boulderish-Satre. He stepped back, opening the door the rest of the way.

Lemrai Trui was a thin, ascetic man of advancing years but quick movements. He had a beak of a nose, and his hair had retreated even from a thin donut of wispy white. Now he had a fuzzy high-water mark around a too-big head. He stared at me around Satre.

"You got 'em? Don't you lie to me. I want to see them first."

I blinked.

"Come in, Astrologamage," said a woman behind the desk, the Baroness Alyssa.

She was much smaller than her overlarge husband, almost normal-sized, with thick brown hair and hazel eyes. Her skin was a little fair to be Doonish, but she wore their style of clothing, a long-sleeved dress that seemed like one thread in four was scarlet, azure, or emerald. On the desk before her lay an abacus, a slate, some chalk, and five little cups of pebbles with another, larger bag of pebbles nearby. A scale held down a disorderly heap of paper. Her fingers and wrists were smudged with chalk.

"Your Highness," I said and walked in.

"Don't hassle the woman," said Satre to Lemrai, who had followed me, hunched forward like he was a vulture waiting for me to croak. He had terrible posture.

Satre continued speaking to me, "Show us the documents. You can put them on the desk there."

I hadn't even put my stuff somewhere, but with all three watching, I dropped the duffel, rooted around within to find a leather portfolio, and displayed the fruits of my labors. I'd gone through Bloodharvest for these, and I was absolutely sure I wasn't going to let them out of my sight. The options were ten sheets of vellum, written in silver ink, and embossed with royal seals of Manari, one of nine Immaculate Dynasties of Elvenhome. Those sheets of paper were almost everything I had and meant many things. They meant a fairly horrible job completed. They meant a fortune. They meant I could have not gone through a horrible job if I hadn't wasted all my money the first time, and they were going to mean I wouldn't waste a fortune again.

Lemrai snatched one option and read it greedily. Satre shut the door behind us and stood against it, and the Baroness reached for another option. She glanced at me before touching it.

"Go ahead. They're real." I beckoned her forward.

She picked it up and took another sheet of paper out of a hidden place behind her desk. She compared the two. That document was thick, bleached-white parchment covered in precise, small script. I'd bet a fortune it had come from a Celephian wind-house.

Actually no, I wouldn't, because I wasn't going to waste any more money. Be smart. Smart.

The two of them perused the documents until the baroness put hers down. Then Lemrai compared that one to the rest, but finally he was done too.

Baroness Alyssa said, "They look valid to me. Mons. Trui?"

He grumbled first, before saying, "Yes, I'll accept. I want to confirm directly with Gesphain though."

"Our windcallers," Satre said behind us.

Alyssa said to Trui, "I think that's fair, but I doubt she'll let them out of her sight until you pay her. Would you like us to wait?"

Lemrai didn't want those options out of his sight, but neither did I. He wasn't happy about that. Finally he conceded to finish the sale now. His hands twitched every time he put one of the options down.

That was that. Trui had the money on deposit with the baroness, and Alyssa let me examine her scale before weighing each of Trui's one hundred and twenty six marks. She was precise, neither quick nor slow. After Trui's money balanced, he took the documents, Trui and I signed a bill of sale, and Satre sealed the contract with his signet ring and the fire. Alyssa had stacked my coinage beside a wooden box, and perhaps to distract me from Satre's action, she had me count the coin-stacks, again, and place them in the wooden box as she packed it with straw. By then Trui had scuttled out, and she sealed the box with more traditional wax.

"Would you like to carry it out of here?" she asked. "We can have it delivered to the Gesphains, if you'd prefer."

"Is there a fee for that?" I asked.

"No. I quite like to know where this much gold is going inside my city, so I'm happy to help in exchange for a little information."

"What information?" I asked.

The baroness smiled. "How did you get options for ten shipfuls of winter wheat from the elves? You're not a wheat merchant."

"The stars!" I replied. I shoulda given her jazz-hands, but I didn't think of it in time.

"Please continue," she answered, and they had me over a barrel.

One hundred and twenty six marks weigh sixty three pounds. We had just weighed them. I wasn't carrying that little box out of here.

"Can I get something to drink first?" I asked, and that's how we got to now.