

UNQUIET LAND

By Sharon Shinn

Chapter One

It was Quinnasweela changeday, and the whole world was on fire. Leah strolled through the Plaza of Women just as night came on and watched in silent appreciation as candles and oil lamps were set in every window of every building in Chialto. The city had been largely converted to gaslight over the past five years, but on this autumn holiday, those pale imitations of fire had been turned off in favor of the real thing.

Leah hadn't realized she'd be back in Chialto in time for the holiday. Well, really, she hadn't given much thought to changedays in the past five years, since she'd been living in the country of Malinqua where the turn of the seasons had never been cause for celebration. If you'd asked her a quintile ago—say, on Quinnatorz changeday—she'd have said she was never returning to the country of Welce. Yet here she was, wandering through the plaza, mingling with the crowds, buying a cup of spiced apple wine from a streetside vendor, and feeling a rare moment of contentment.

She had to admit she loved being back at the Plaza of Women. Situated on the edge of the formal shop district, it was a big, paved space that would have been flat and open except that it was crowded with booths and stalls. Even on ordinary days, those booths held an endless variety of merchandise, from fresh flowers to used clothing to alcohol of dubious origin. Tonight, there were ten times as many stalls, each crammed to bursting with cheap trinkets, bundles of cloth, samples of flavorful food, and candles in every shape, scent, and color.

And other oddments.

Leah had decided to head back to her apartment for the night when she came across a large, rickety booth tucked off the main path. It was shaded by a wide sheet of blue fabric that hung perilously close to the torches that illuminated the unexpected merchandise for sale: dozens of exotic fish, each swimming in its own clear glass bowl.

She'd never seen anything like them before—triangle-shaped creatures with narrow, pointed faces and frills of diaphanous fins completely encircling the widest portion of their bodies. They came in vivid colors, glittering green, rippling gold, dusky blue, rich purple, but all of them had eyes so dark they appeared to be an unblinking black. They were like living jewels suspended in crystal water.

The booth was crowded with other customers moving with amazement from one glass bowl to another. Three slim, dark young men—looking enough like each other to be brothers—ran between tables, answering questions and begging the onlookers not to dangle their fingers in the water.

"They'll bite," one of the brothers warned a young girl who was doing just that. "Hard enough to draw blood."

The girl hastily withdrew her hand. The woman with her, most likely her

mother, asked, "What do you feed them?"

"Anything, really, but they prefer meat. They'll eat each other if you put two together."

Leah moved from bowl to bowl, bending down to marvel at each occupant. "I've never seen anything like them," she said when one of the brothers was close enough to hear. "Where do they come from?"

"Cozique, these days," he answered. "That's where the breeders live, anyway. But the first pairs were caught in Yoramol and shipped back to the southern seas."

Yoramol! a few of the other customers murmured. Yoramol was practically a mythic place, so distant that almost no one in this part of the world had ever sailed there. Leah figured the chances were about even that these fish had actually originated in that faraway spot. More likely they could be found in the seas off Berringey or Dhonsho, where they were so thick in the water that you could scoop them out by hand. Unless you were afraid of being bitten.

"I don't understand. Are they good for eating? They're so small," complained a man who was looking around the booth with some bewilderment.

"Of course you don't *eat* them!" exclaimed one of the other onlookers, a middle-aged woman in fashionable clothing. "They're for looking at! They're just for having a pretty thing in your life. Like a painting, but alive. Like a flower."

The man's expression suggested he didn't bother much with art or botany, either. Practical and unimaginative; hunti, at a guess, or torz. "I just don't get the point," he said in a grumpy voice.

"Then the reifarjin is not for you," the vendor said.

The man made a disgruntled noise and stalked off, no doubt to seek out something more sensible, like a hand saw or a milking bucket. A small girl danced around the fashionable woman, tugging at her wrist.

"I want one," the girl begged. "Please, can I have one? Can I?"

"I don't think your mother would like it," the woman answered.

"We can leave it at your house and I'll just come visit."

"Oh, so *I'm* the one who has to feed it and give it fresh water every day?"

"Maybe it wouldn't be very hungry," the girl said hopefully.

Leah smiled, listening to them, and stepped to the last table. There were only three bowls here; soon she would have seen everything on offer in the booth and she could go home. It was ridiculous that she had spent so much time here anyway. She didn't want a fish, whether or not it bore a lovely name like reifarjin. Like the petulant man, she was not in the market for a purely decorative acquisition. She had spent too many years caring only for herself; she wasn't sure she should be trusted with the responsibility of keeping something else alive.

The fish in the first two bowls were both small, copper-colored, and lethargic. Leah wondered if they were sick, or maybe only half-grown. That was something else she should ask one of the brothers. How long did reifarjin live? Were they so delicate that one would barely survive the trip back to her lodgings, or so hardy that she'd be stuck with it for the next decade? If she was silly enough to buy one. Which of course she wouldn't be. There could hardly be a more coru purchase than a fish, and Leah had never had much affinity for the element of water. She was a torz woman, tied to earth and flesh. Reliable and practical and dull.

Well—except for the past five years. Past six.

She shook her head and bent down to get a closer look at the reifarjin in the final bowl. It was slightly larger than the others and gorgeously colored, with streaks of brilliant raspberry fading into cobalt blue. It sported a double row of the feathery fins, one in each color, fluttering so rapidly in the still water that they seemed to form one vibrant shade of heliotrope. Most of the other reifarjin had seemed unaware of their human audience, but this one knew she was there, Leah thought: As soon as she ducked down to examine it, it sidled closer to the glass, watching her mistrustfully from one large eye while its circlet of fins quivered in agitation or resentment. When she lifted a hand and traced her finger from the top to the bottom of the bowl, the fish lifted its gaze to track her movement.

I want you, she thought, so powerfully and so unexpectedly that it was almost as if someone else had whispered the words in her ear.

One of the brothers materialized at her side. “What do you think?” he asked.

“Why does this one look different from the others?” Leah said.

He shrugged. “Don’t really know. Maybe one in fifty is a blended color like that. They behave the same as the others. Eat the same food. They just look different.”

“Do they cost more?” she wanted to know.

He eyed her, sensing a sale. “Sometimes.”

Leah straightened up, took a step away. “Well—”

“But not this one,” the vendor said hastily. “Regular price.”

“Which is?”

He eyed her again, trying to gauge her monetary status from her appearance. She didn’t think her clothing gave much away. She was wearing a plain green tunic and matching pants, both out of season; she’d pulled her dark brown hair back into a messy knot and hadn’t bothered with cosmetics. She’d lost weight while she was in Malinqua, so she looked a little underfed for her stocky body, and the wariness she’d developed in the past five years could sometimes be read as worry. It was extremely unlikely he would peg her for what she really was: a prodigal daughter of the Five Families who had finally made her way home.

“Two quint-golds,” he said.

“*Two quint-golds!*” she repeated, her voice as shocked as if he’d named a price twenty times that high.

“Usually,” he added. “But we’re offering a special price for Quinnasweela. One quint-gold. That includes the bowl and everything.”

She spared a moment to wonder how they could possibly sell the fish *without* the bowls and another moment to think she was a complete idiot. And then she firmly shut down her brain so she wouldn’t think at all. “I’ll take it,” she said. “This one.”

It would have made sense to go directly from the vendor’s booth back to her lodgings, carrying the reifarjin by the handles of the sturdy woven bag that was also part of her purchase price. But as Leah tried to avoid the worst of the changeday crowds, she ended up passing the center of the Plaza and the raised dais where the blind sisters sat. By the light of their own ring of torches, she could see that one of

the three seers was not, at the moment, entertaining a visitor. So she climbed right up the wooden steps and sank to her knees before the other woman and carefully set her new acquisition down on the planks beside her.

“Blessed changeday to you,” she said. “I have some questions to ask.”

The blind seer tilted her head to one side, as if planning to listen closely to all the things Leah would and would not say. This woman and her sisters had operated in this very same spot for as long as Leah could remember—for decades, probably. There was some speculation that they were not the same women who had first commandeered the dais here in the heart of the Plaza, that they were the nieces or daughters or granddaughters of the first sisters who had unrolled their mats and began trading in information. But they knew everything about everyone in the city—perhaps in all of Welce. You could buy their knowledge with a coin or pay for it with information of your own. Never, as far as Leah knew, had their information been false. And never had anyone been able to tell them apart. They were three big-boned, soft-skinned, blank-eyed women who harvested secrets and shared the rich bounty.

“Ask, then,” the woman replied.

“How much do I owe you?” Unlike the fish vendor, the seer wouldn’t haggle. She would name a price and Leah would pay it or go somewhere else to try to discover what she wanted to know.

“I can’t answer that until I know the questions.”

“I want to learn about—about—the decoy princess.”

The seer didn’t seem surprised or skeptical. She didn’t ask why that would be a topic of interest to anyone. She merely nodded. “The little girl. Mally.”

“That’s her name. What do I need to pay you?”

“Two silvers,” said the other woman.

A low price. Clearly none of the information about Mally was particularly sensitive. Leah handed over the coins and then said, “Tell me about her. Everything.”

The woman fingered the coins. “Your accent makes you a native Welchin. And yet you know nothing about the child?”

“I’ve been living abroad. There is much about the current political situation that I don’t know.”

The sister nodded. “Well, then,” she said. “This is her story. Odelia is the daughter of King Vernon and his fourth wife, Romelle, and she had been named as heir to the throne. Darien Serlast—you know who Darien Serlast is?”

Leah was tempted to answer, *I know him very well, in fact. I was in Malinqua at his request, spying on a foreign nation.* But of course, she never told anyone that. “He’s the regent.”

“When Odelia was born, he was still just an advisor to the old king. But Darien Serlast is the one who thought it would be a good idea to find another child who could stand in for Odelia to keep the true princess safe in case danger ever threatened. Taro Frothen—the torz prime—is the one who discovered Mally. The resemblance between the two girls is said to be remarkable, although it is not clear if they are actually related.”

They were, Leah knew, in the way that all the members of the Five Families were related after years of intermarriage, but the connection was distant. Romelle

was Taro's fifth or sixth cousin; Leah could never remember exactly. Torz, anyway, with a faint thread of Frothen blood in her veins. And Mally was Taro's great-niece, though only a handful of people were aware of that fact.

"No one knows who Mally's parents are?" Leah asked.

The seer shook her head. "I imagine Taro Frothen knows, but they say that even Romelle is in the dark."

"So once Taro produced this girl, how was she used over the past five years?"

"Odelia had been certified as King Vernon's heir, but he died not long after she was born. Romelle and her baby and her older daughter went to live on Taro's estates because she said she wanted to raise her children away from the scheming at court. But of course, they had to come into Chialto on many formal occasions. On those visits, sometimes Romelle brought Odelia and sometimes she brought Mally. No one ever knew if it was the real princess or the fake one, and this is one of the reasons, or so everyone believes, that there was never any attempt on Odelia's life."

"And no one could ever tell them apart?"

The seer smiled slightly. "Well, the primes could," she replied, "but they had every reason to keep up the fiction."

The primes. Of course. Each prime had a deep connection with one of the five elements, and this translated into an almost mystical ability to decipher truths about the people around them. Taro Frothen was a man of earth and flesh—he could touch a stranger's hand and instantly identify him, recite his genealogy and probably describe the state of his health as well. Nelson Ardelay, the sweela prime, could sift through anyone's thoughts and pick the truth from the lie. Leah had heard that the coru prime could read a person's blood; she didn't know how the hunti and elay primes decoded people and arranged them into family groupings, but she was sure they could do it.

"The primes," Leah echoed. "But no one else?"

"No. And so the arrangement continued for the first few years of Odelia's life. But then, back in Quinnahunti, there began to be questions. It turned out that Mally was the only one who had been seen at court for several quintiles. Odelia never left the Frothen estates. Darien Serlast demanded to know why, and the truth came out about the princess."

"What truth?" Leah had heard some of the story, but incomplete pieces of it, filtered through travelers who had made the long journey between Welce and Malinqua and who weren't as fascinated by this tale as she was.

"She has a condition. Her body is healthy but she seems trapped in her own mind, seeing things and experiencing things in a way that is different from the rest of us. She understands words but rarely speaks them—knows who her family is, but rarely touches them. As soon as the primes understood her situation, they realized she would never be fit to rule."

"And so they chose Darien Serlast to be the next king," Leah said impatiently, because she already knew this part of the story and she didn't care about it much.

The seer offered another one of her faint smiles. "After much debate and disagreement and political maneuvering, they chose Darien Serlast," the woman amplified. "Deciding against the other three princesses who might also have been considered candidates for the throne."

“Yes, but—didn’t it turn out that those other princesses were not actually Vernon’s daughters? That his various wives had—ah—relied on the services of other men when it looked like Vernon would not be able to sire children of his own?”

The seer looked amused now, though Leah imagined it had been quite a shock the first time she and her sisters had absorbed *that* particular bit of information. “You are correct. And it was in large part due to the fact that Josetta, Corene, and Natalie were not Vernon’s blood that the primes decided to look elsewhere to bestow the crown.”

Yes, fine, but Leah didn’t really care how Darien’s story had unfolded. “So. Once Odelia was no longer the heir, what happened to Mally?”

The seer shrugged. “Her life has not changed much, though it is much quieter now. She still lives with the torz prime and his wife on their country estate. Romelle and Odelia and Natalie live there also, as they always have. They just do not come to Chialto nearly as often.”

“And Mally—she is happy there? With Taro and his wife?”

“It is hard to judge the happiness of a five-year-old girl,” the blind sister replied. “But the prime and his wife are kind and loving people, and she has been given every material comfort. Compared to most other orphans, her situation is very good.”

“Orphans?” Leah repeated. “I thought you said you didn’t know anything about her parents.”

The seer shrugged. “It has been more than a quintile since the truth came out about Odelia,” she said. “In all those ninedays, no parents have come forward to claim Mally as their own. If they had turned her over to Taro merely to serve the crown, they have no reason to keep their silence now. But they have not. Which means they are either dead or—” Her voice trailed off.

“Or?”

The seer shrugged again. “Or they are careless and irresponsible people who have no business raising a child. If they have not come forward by now, it seems unlikely that they will—and better for Mally if they never do.”

Chapter Two

Leah stayed up too late watching the changeday revels from the second-story window of her small apartment, so she slept in on firstday. Once she'd dressed and eaten breakfast, she wasted the rest of the morning trying to figure out the best place to set the fishbowl. Too much sunlight was bad for the reifarjin, the vendor had told her, but it couldn't survive in constant shade. It liked to observe movement. It enjoyed being near colorful things. It needed to be fed every day.

Leah was finding it more and more absurd that she had burdened herself with such a fanciful acquisition. *What was I thinking?* And yet she still felt a little possessive thrill of happiness every time she glanced at its wide, gorgeous shape.

She ultimately placed it on a small table just inside her door, within the open rectangle that served as the kierten. A kierten never included furniture or any useful items; its very emptiness signaled that the tenants had so much space they could allow some of it to go unused. But a kierten often sported some purely ornamental touches, such as plants or vases or paintings. Leah figured a decorative fish qualified. And, since her lodgings consisted of a single chamber with the tiniest of bathing rooms tucked into one corner, the reifarjin could observe her every movement, even if she thrashed in her sleep.

"So I suppose you'll be quite happy here," Leah observed as she bent down to study it through the glass. It fluttered its variegated fins and positioned itself so it could stare back at her from one of its oversize eyes. She wasn't sure that expression indicated happiness. "Are you hungry?"

She dribbled meat scraps into the water and was amused to see the reifarjin abandon its wary reserve to go chasing after each piece before it settled to the bottom of the bowl. Once it had gobbled up the last morsel, it turned its dark eye on her again, so she sifted a few more bits into the bowl, and those were quickly devoured as well.

"I wonder if you would eat yourself to death if I just kept feeding you," she said. "I didn't think to ask. Maybe Chandran will know. I'm going to write and tell him all about you. Maybe he's heard of reifarjin before."

She brushed the last crumbs off her palms and went hunting for writing materials. She'd only been in Welce three days, and she'd already written Chandran twice. But of course, the journey itself had taken almost two ninedays, and a great deal had happened since she'd seen him last.

She really hadn't expected to miss him so much. She'd known him barely a quintile as she worked beside him in his booth in the Great Market, selling expensive goods to Malinqua's wealthiest citizens. It had been clear early on that both of them were refugees from other countries, other lives, and that they were not interested in sharing their secrets with anybody. At first this had led them to distrust each other, but gradually it had helped build a sort of bond between them. She didn't know when she had started to think Chandran was the one person she would want to confide in. She didn't know when she'd started to hope *he* would confide in *her*. But now that he was more than a nineday's journey away, she found herself wanting to talk to him all the time, tell him what she was thinking, describe what she was witnessing, get his measured insights on the events of the day.

Now that he was so far away, she wished she had a chance to get closer.

But that was foolish. He was very well-established in Malinqua and she was determined to find her place in Welce; neither of them was likely to uproot again. It was pointless to keep writing letters, keep calculating how many days it would take for his first reply to cross the ocean once he knew where to send a letter in return. It was ridiculous to find herself mourning a friendship that had been so brief and had no future.

But she was still going to tell him about the reifarjin.

She had just located a blank piece of paper when there was a knock on the door, brisk and peremptory. Not the landlord's usual timid rap, but she couldn't think who else would be calling on her. No one else even knew she was in the city. Except—

She wasn't surprised, upon opening the door, to see two soldiers standing in the hall. They were wearing royal livery—severe black uniforms ornamented only with the five-colored Welchin rosette—and polite expressions.

"We've come from the regent," said one in a pleasant voice. "Would now be a good time for you to visit him?"

She was tempted to answer *No*, just to see what the guard would say next, but there was really no point to it. She had to talk to Darien Serlast sometime; might as well get it over with now.

"Of course," she said, equally as pleasant. "Let's go."

The trip to the palace was accomplished in a small elaymotive. The two men sat up front, one of them driving, while Leah lounged in the well-padded passenger compartment behind them. She'd only been in a smoker car a few times before she left for Malinqua, but since she'd been gone, the gas-powered vehicles had clearly become more luxurious. They'd also become more common—it seemed like half the other conveyances they passed were also elaymotives, some small like this one, others that were twice its size. She even saw a couple that she thought might be public transports capable of holding twenty or thirty people.

It wasn't long before they were on the winding road that led to the palace, which was situated halfway up a low mountain. It was an extensive and pretty building of golden stone—not nearly as big or dramatic as the royal residence in Malinqua, but still impressive. Its most dramatic feature was the great waterfall that gushed beside it, tumbling all the way down from the top of the mountain, pausing to fill a lake beside the courtyard, and then rushing along the eastern edge of the city before making its way out to sea. *Malinqua doesn't have anything to compare to the Marisi River, now does it?* Leah thought with a certain satisfaction. *Chandran would love the Marisi.*

She shook her head to shake the thought away.

Soon enough, she had disembarked in the courtyard and was turned over to a servant who escorted her through the cavernous kierten of the palace. He shepherded her to the stairwell that led to the right section of the palace, the wing that had always been Vernon's. The stairwell on the left led to the queen's wing, where Vernon's four wives had lived in a far from harmonious state. Leah wondered if Darien and his wife similarly kept separate quarters. He was married to Zoe

Lalindar, the coru prime, by all accounts an unpredictable and strong-willed woman. Leah thought that if *she* was married to Darien Serlast, she'd probably want the width of the palace between them. She liked Darien, but...

The servant led her to a second-floor room with high ceilings, huge windows, and comfortable furnishings; her immediate impression was that this would be a place you wouldn't mind being in for hours at a time. Probably Darien's office, the place where he did most of the work of governing.

"Leah Frothen," the servant announced as she stepped through the door.

And sure enough, there was Darien, sitting behind a tidy desk but rising instantly to his feet. "Leah. I'm so pleased you could come right away," he said, and she could hear the edge of sarcasm in his voice. *If by "right away" I mean the minute I requested your presence and not the minute you sailed into harbor.* "Come sit by the window and we'll talk for a while."

The servant closed the door behind him as Leah strolled over to a table that was already set with tall glasses and a pitcher of fruited water. The windows overlooked the placid lake, which reflected back bright sun and cloudless skies and the honey color of the palace walls.

As they settled into their chairs, she took a moment to study him. The past five years seemed to have left him remarkably unchanged, considering how much he'd been through in that period: He'd seen his king die, had taken on the burdens of regency, gotten married, and sired a daughter. But whatever turmoil he'd experienced barely showed. His face was still handsome, narrow, and impossible to read; his gray eyes were coolly assessing and gave nothing away. Maybe there were a few strands of silver in his dark hair, a couple of new lines on his face. Otherwise, the intervening years sat lightly on him.

Not as true for her, apparently. "You look different," he observed.

"Different how?"

"Thinner. And your hair—"

"Yes, I cut it and colored it while I was in Malinqua," she said. "Not that I really needed to disguise myself, because no one there knew me, but—" She shrugged.

"A wise precaution," he said. "But now that you're back in Welce, perhaps you will revert to your true appearance."

"And perhaps I'll keep changing it," she retorted.

He smiled at that and poured water for both of them. "A very coru sentiment," he said. "Have you changed your affiliation as well as your outward aspect?"

She thought of the reifarjin even now fanning its gaudy frills in her apartment. "I'm not sure I could manage to sustain coru for longer than a defiant moment or two," she said.

"It does seem to be the most exhausting of the elements," he agreed, sipping at his water. "Though frequently rewarding."

She smiled. Like most people who met him, she'd always found Darien intimidating. He was so smooth, so assured, and so well-informed; she always felt like he knew everything about her and she knew nothing about him and this imbalance would never work to her advantage. But years of living on her own in a

strange country had given Leah a large measure of confidence in her own skills and intuition. She was a lot harder to impress these days.

"But you didn't call me here to discuss the elemental traits," she said. "So what would you like to know?"

He didn't even blink at the abrupt question. "I'd like your final report about the empress of Malinqua and her current situation," he said. "But first I'd like to hear your version about what exactly is going on with my daughter."

For the first time, Leah felt a twinge of guilt that she hadn't made it to the palace as soon as she arrived in Chialto. She'd been focused on her own emotions at being back in the country of her birth. She hadn't thought about Darien and how worried he must be about Corene.

Eighteen years ago, Darien had been one of the trusted court favorites who had helped King Vernon produce a series of heirs. Corene had been born to Vernon's third wife, Alys, but it was years before anyone realized Darien was really her father. Upon Vernon's death, Darien began to take an active role in Corene's life—even more active once it turned out Alys was the least nurturing mother any child could hope to have—but he had never developed an easy relationship with that red-headed wild child. A quintile ago, Corene had run away to Malinqua against Darien's expressed wishes. He had sent Nelson Ardelay to bring her home, but once the sweela prime arrived on the scene, Corene ran even farther away. And from what Leah had seen, Corene didn't intend to come home any time soon.

"I thought Nelson must have explained all that," Leah said.

Darien looked briefly and deeply annoyed. "Nelson explained that Corene went to visit Cozique with a friend she had made at the Malinquesse court," he said. "He didn't explain why he, or Corene, or *anybody* would consider this a good idea."

Leah held back a smile and spoke in a serious voice. "While she was in Malinqua, Corene seemed to come into her own," she said. "She grew more certain of herself—she developed close friendships—she seemed to give a great deal of thought to the kind of person she wanted to be. I think she's still on that journey, and she thought by coming home she would cut that journey short. But I believe you would like the person she is becoming."

Darien narrowed his gray eyes but didn't answer, just nodded at her to continue.

"Anyway, you have to admit that Corene could hardly have picked a more strategic place to run away to than Cozique," Leah added. It was the largest, wealthiest, and most powerful nation in the southern seas. "That friend she made at court? The daughter of the Coziquela queen. A *very* good friend to have."

"Nelson says she is envisioning herself as some sort of international ambassador for Welce."

"I think she is. And I think she'll be a good one."

Darien drummed his fingers on the table. "Well, it does us no harm to achieve closer relations with Cozique," he said at last. "Whether Corene is capable of cementing those relations—and whether she is actually *safe* while she sojourns there—I am not so certain."

"Surely you have spies at the Coziquela court," Leah said softly.

He smiled reluctantly. "Yes, of course," he said. "But none of them with quite

the same level of—sophistication—as you. Would you be interested in taking an assignment in Cozique?”

She sat up straighter, because she hadn’t expected that. “What? No. Thank you for your faith in me, but I’ve been away from Welce too long. I don’t know that I’m happy to be back, but—but I need to stay a while and find out.”

He watched her a moment, as if trying to determine what she hadn’t said, since it was likely to be more interesting than what she *had*, then he nodded. “Very well. We’ll revisit that in a moment. First, tell me your impressions of the current situation in Malinqua. Cozique forces came in and took over the harbor—did the empress make terms? Has she been left powerless, or will she recover from this disaster?”

“I think she is already scheming how to recover, and I don’t think it will take her that long,” Leah said, and launched into a recital of the last exciting days at the Malinques court.

When she was finished, Darien remarked, “I rarely say this, but I’m glad Nelson was on hand to play a part.”

Leah laughed out loud. “He was magnificent,” she said. “I’d forgotten how impressive the power of the primes could be.”

“Yes, well, we strive to live in times where they are not called upon to show off their fearsome abilities,” Darien replied dryly.

She decided not to ask him how often his own wife worked her elemental magic on water. Zoe Lalindar had flooded the Marisi a few years back; Leah supposed you didn’t need to do that too often to remind people what you were capable of. “Calm and serenity,” she agreed. “That’s what we want.”

Darien surveyed her a moment. “And is that what you’re hoping to find now that you’ve returned to Welce? What are your plans?”

She lifted her chin. “I want to see Mally.”

He nodded. “Of course. But in what capacity? Do you plan to walk into Taro’s house and pull her aside and introduce yourself as her mother? Speaking as one who had no claim on his oldest daughter until she was nearly twelve, it is not so easy to become a parent overnight. For you *or* the child.”

Darien Serlast, offering a personal example from his own life to make a point. She couldn’t remember that ever happening before. “I haven’t thought it through,” she admitted. “I thought maybe Taro would let me stay with them for a while. Get to know her slowly. I don’t know.”

He was still watching her with those intent gray eyes. “And that’s another consideration,” he said. “Have you given any thought to what you might do to fill your time? Do you want to take up court life again? Or are you looking for more meaningful occupation?”

She had been prepared to respond with another helpless *I don’t know*, but that last question stopped her. *I’m an idiot*, she thought. *Darien didn’t ask me here to learn about Corene or inquire into my feelings. He wants to offer me another job.* She lifted her head and gave him back a stare as cool and assessing as his own. “Just come out with it,” she said. “What is it you want me to do?”

That made him smile, which warmed his face to an amazing degree. “I was thinking about your situation,” he said. “And I had some thoughts about a course you

could take that might ease your way *and* serve the crown.”

“‘Serve the crown.’ I like that,” she said. “It sounds much more noble than ‘do some secret business for me.’”

He shrugged. “If you’re interested, say so. If not, I won’t trouble you with my ideas.”

And that was something else about Darien. He could make you feel like you were in the wrong even when you weren’t. “Please, majesty, I’d like to hear how I might be of service to my liege.”

He paused a moment, as if marshaling his thoughts. Before he could speak, there was a quiet knock and a man entered. He was tall, bald, ageless and expressionless; he looked like he could disappear into the walls of the palace if he was so inclined. Leah had never seen him before—then again, she guessed that he probably went to a great deal of trouble *not* to be noticed. She had the sense that he was high on the list of Darien’s trusted army of spies. He had that look.

He glanced at Leah, and when Darien nodded, he said, “There’s been another one.”

She could feel Darien’s attention narrow into a sudden cold fury, though his voice remained carefully neutral. “Where?”

“On the banks of the Marisi. Where the vagrants camp.”

“Now that surprises me,” Darien said. “The camps are patrolled.”

The man nodded. “It seems she—”

“She?” Darien interrupted.

“Yes. It seems she made her way there afterward. So it happened somewhere else.”

“And there was nothing she could tell you?”

“No.”

Leah was looking idly out the window, trying to pretend she wasn’t interested in the conversation and thinking that whatever had happened to this unfortunate woman must be pretty awful if Darien allowed his spymaster to interrupt him while he was conducting other business. She waited until she heard the click of the door closing, then she turned her head to give the regent a look of wide-eyed curiosity. “That sounded mysterious. And unpleasant.”

“It is both those things,” Darien agreed. “But it’s not what I want to talk about with you today.”

Leah didn’t even bother asking more questions. There was never any point in badgering Darien. “You were going to tell me how I could be of assistance to you.”

“Indeed I was,” Darien responded. His voice was perfectly calm, perfectly level. Maybe whatever had just happened wasn’t so bad after all. “As I think you know, during the past eight or nine years, Welce has increased its international trade partners and strengthened alliances across the southern seas. We have made even more progress in the past two or three years—though obviously we have experienced a slight setback with Malinqua. We have been hoping to develop tighter bonds with Cozique, simply because Cozique is so powerful. And yet we must always be mindful of the fact that our near neighbors can be our truest allies or our most bitter foes, simply because of their geographic placement.”

Our near neighbors... “Do you mean Soeche-Tas?” she demanded. “What have

they done now?"

Soeche-Tas shared a continent with Welce, though dense mountains on Welce's northern border had generally served to enforce peace between nations. Over the centuries, the two countries had sometimes skirmished over fishing territories and mining rights, but they had managed to avoid outright war. About six years ago, Vernon had thought to improve relations with Soeche-Tas by marrying Corene off to its aging viceroy, but Zoe had strongly objected, and the wedding had been called off in the most dramatic way possible. Leah had left the country shortly afterward, so she didn't know how that broken covenant had affected relations.

"The Soechins haven't done anything—that I'm aware of," Darien said. "But they're making alliances too. And one interesting trading partner they have begun to woo is the Karkades."

Leah frowned. "But— isn't that a possession of Cozique? And not a very big one, either."

"Right on both counts. Except certain factions in the Karkades have been suing for independence during the past few years. And these factions have begun treating with other nations of the southern seas. They already have a partnership with Dhonsho. They are close to signing a deal with Soeche-Tas. And some of their representatives want to call on me to discuss strengthening relations with Welce."

"That might not make Cozique's queen too happy," Leah observed.

"No. In fact, it might make her quite irritable."

Which put Corene's flight to Cozique in an entirely different light. "So you really *are* worried about your daughter's safety."

"Cozique is too civilized to murder foreign diplomats in a fit of pique," Darien said softly. "But I admit this is an unexpected complication."

Leah was still thinking. "And of course you don't want to reject a treaty with the Karkades out of hand, since you would like to keep the peace with Soeche-Tas."

"Precisely," Darien said. "But I am not sure how easily the Karkades will be put off by vague promises, since the ruling factions are eager to make a point to Cozique. They want allies, they want them now, and they want them to swear unwavering support. It is a delicate situation, to be sure."

"Maybe send someone to Cozique to bring Corene home," Leah suggested. "She's become politically savvy. One she understands how the situation stands, I think she'll fall in line."

"Yes, but even if I subtract Corene from the equation, I don't know that I will rush to sign treaties with the Karkades," Darien said. "I don't like being manipulated, that's one thing. And—I don't know enough about the place, that's another."

"What? No Welchin operatives in its primary cities? I'm shocked."

Darien shrugged. "The Karkades never seemed important enough to investigate," he said. "I have people on the way now, of course, but they might not arrive in time."

"So what do you want *me* to do?" Leah asked.

He was studying her again as if trying to gauge how much duress she could handle before collapsing in exhaustion. "As I said, we are expecting an influx of visitors from the Karkades and Soeche-Tas. I suspect a few advance spies are already here, in fact, but the first official delegation doesn't arrive for a couple more

ninedays. I thought—it's such a small thing—but these foreign arrivals might feel more at home if they had access to some of their favorite native traditions. Food, clothing, spices—”

“You want me to open a shop,” Leah said. For a moment she was so surprised she couldn't tell if the idea delighted or horrified her.

“I do,” Darien replied. “While you were in Malinqua, you worked at the city's Great Market, or so you told me, and you seemed to find it an agreeable experience. If you were a purveyor of exotic goods, you would be in an excellent position to make international contacts, since you would frequently interact with both suppliers and customers. And if you actually enjoyed running a business—” Darien shrugged. “All the better.”

“I did like it, but I wasn't doing most of the work,” she told him. “I was employed by someone who ran the business. Invested the money, dealt with suppliers, set the prices, paid the taxes—all of it.”

“The Welchin crown would be your principal investor, and I would not expect an accounting of your profits,” Darien said gravely. “If it turned out this was an enterprise you eventually wanted to run on your own, we could discuss terms for how you could buy me out. Otherwise, it would exist only until this particular crisis is past, and you would not need to display any business acumen to operate it.”

“But I'd still need to—locate a property and set it up and find suppliers and order goods—” She was protesting, but Leah had to admit she was intrigued. She *had* enjoyed being Chandran's assistant in Malinqua's Great Market. She'd had a knack for picking merchandise that would sell, and she'd found it easy to develop a rapport with even the pickiest of customers. Of course, one reason she'd liked the work so much was she'd liked being around Chandran. The retail life wouldn't be nearly so enjoyable if she was running the business on her own.

“As to getting the enterprise started, Zoe has some thoughts she could share,” Darien said. “I believe you would be able to open your doors much sooner than you might anticipate.”

Leah wondered how exactly the coru prime would be able to assist her in setting up a shop. It would be worth it to say yes just to learn the answer. But there was one very large objection to the whole scheme—which, she admitted, did hold a certain unexpected appeal. “I can't stay in Chialto and run a business for you, Darien,” she said, and the regret in her voice was real. “I came back to Welce to see Mally. And that means I have to go where Mally is.”

“Yes, but Mally will be in Chialto for the next quintile,” he said. “I have made arrangements.”

Her breath caught in her throat. Of course he had. Darien must really want her to take on this little venture; he had gone to some trouble to remove all possible obstacles. “What arrangements?”

“Taro's wife has agreed to bring Mally to the city for an extended visit,” Darien said. “Taro, as I'm sure you know, generally refuses to leave his estates except on explicit order from the crown, but Virrie is much more sociable. I hope to convince her to stay at a property I own in Chialto so she is not even responsible for running a household while she is here. Once you determine how you would like to introduce yourself to your daughter, you can visit with her as often as you like.”

Leah's heart was beating strangely fast; the thought of seeing Mally made her feel faint with excitement and dread. "You're trying to make it impossible for me to say no to this scheme of yours, aren't you?" she managed to say.

"I wouldn't put it that way," Darien said. "But I am certainly trying to make it easy for you to say yes."

She wondered if she could shock him. "And if I said I'd do it, but only if you made sure I never accidentally ran into Rhan Ardelay? Would you kidnap him and hustle him out of the city?"

It felt strange to say Rhan's name out loud. She had spent so much energy in the past five years trying to forget that Nelson Ardelay's youngest son even existed, and now here she was using him as a way to taunt Darien Serlast. But Darien was one of the few people who knew that Rhan was Mally's father. Darien had known even before Nelson did.

The regent lifted his eyebrows. "Is that one of your requirements? If so, let us discuss it."

She had to laugh. He was bluffing, she thought, but she was tempted to see how far Darien would go to get what he wanted. "It's not a requirement at the *moment*," she said. "I'll let you know if it becomes a condition in the future."

"So you'll do it?" he said. "Run the shop?"

She wanted to say she needed to think it over, but she could tell her mind was already made up and it seemed pointless to make Darien wait for her answer. Well, except to teach him that he couldn't just move people here and there like pieces on a game board, but since he obviously could, she didn't think he'd learn the lesson, anyway. "I will," she said. "I think it sounds like fun."