

**Firedancer**

**By S. A. Bolich**

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## Chapter 1

### The Ancient

This fire was malicious. Jetta felt it the instant she stepped through the door of the flaming houseplace. Fear struck her like a raptor, draining her strength as if great claws had pierced all her veins and bled her life away. Heat blasted the naked skin of her arms and legs; smoke stung her nose. Startled, she took a step sideways, and shied again from hot grit crunching under her bare feet. She stopped just inside the door, heedless of the flames running up the lintel beside her, reaching hungrily for the carved ceiling. Her legs, her strong Dancer's legs, suddenly felt like grass bent before a storm wind. Shuddery cold swept through her, for all that the hot breath of the fire was in her face, a reek of charred wood and scorched stone that swept her straight back to a damp spring night laden with screams and the smell of destruction.

*I can't. Not this time. Not again.*

Fire exploded from the wall on her left. Jetta spun toward it, and shied back from the sight of white stone crawling with flame, paling rapidly from sullen red to eager gold. Here was no tame hearth fire escaped from its bondage to take vengeance on its captors. Only the deep fire, the heartfire of the world, the Old Man himself, could eat stone.

The Ancient was coming.

She retreated a step, shaken so badly that for an instant even her training deserted her. All she saw was fire writhing in febrile, hungry curtains. Like last time. Reaching for her...like last time. Out of control. Like last time.

She stumbled back, flinching from flame curling hot fingers over her toes, and turned blindly for the door. Two steps, and she would be free of fire forever.

A scream reached her, high and frightened, piercing the laughing roar of the fire like a thin-bladed knife. She jumped, and all around her fire leaped back. Jetta spun all the way around, instinct greater than fear rooting her in place. The fire retreated, uncertain now.

Shame drove through Jetta's fear. She took a step—forward, not back. Fire fled on the right. On the left it feinted, a licking yellow coil as long as her arm reaching for her face. She jerked her right hand up, palm out, in imperious demand. The fire recoiled out of reach. The smothering heat suddenly lessened as though winter had breathed on the flames. Jetta laughed and stepped into the Dance.

Bare feet ground soot and ash underfoot, the flagstones cool now against her soles. She shoved off from her right foot into a leap and spin, completely over a knee-high flame trying to sustain itself on bits of a charred chair. Fear spun away with the turn; Jetta landed on smooth-polished stone and twirled on one foot, arms raised, exulting in the sudden cool rush of power

swirling up through her from the ground under the pale stones laid over Earth Mother's thick skin. All at once the air tasted of damp earth and the green density of living forest.

She stamped an infant flame into non-existence, the smoke of its death curling impotently around her legs. Step, step, turn, shoving more smoke out of her way, her arms stretching now toward the ceiling in mocking imitation of the enemy, now outward in the demanding arc that drew a line that flame could not cross. Step, turn, step again, her feet grinding flame underfoot, forward into the teeth of avid death. Fire leaped and roared around her, licking eagerly into the air that was its goal, its life, its escape from its prison in the earth. Flame squeezed up through the joins of the stone floor and walls and raced eagerly toward exposed lintels and furniture and draperies sweeping into peril from window rods. Jetta raised one bare arm, her dusky gold skin glistening in the uneven light, and shoved her palm toward the threatened ceiling. Smoke parted in front of it; the fire that had been crawling into the irreplaceable Fornay carvings recoiled. Step, turn, step, caught up in the ancient, soaring power of the Dance.

Another scream, fainter. Jetta faltered. Heat suddenly blasted at her; smoke tasted bitter on her tongue as the sustaining cocoon started to shred around her. Malicious fire....

Memories of death, and pain, and screams, and a fire that laughed, a deep coughing roar as it consumed....

*I am master!*

Training and a lifetime's conditioning shoved down the memories, forced phantom pain from her left arm, her leg. Jetta clapped her hands and pirouetted in place, willing the barriers of the Dance back up around her. Fighting rebellious little quivers deep in her gut, she looked closer at the flames running over the pallid stone, and saw that this was surface fire still, pale, but not yet the white heartfire no water could quench. She heard no hissing pop of collapsing rock as flame consumed the air in the porous windstone. This fire was malicious, aye, but as yet it was only the forerunner of the ancient fire that lived in the deepest core of the earth; it was not the foe itself that the Fire Clans had hunted since time began. The yellow of these flames was well diluted with the base red that spoke of uncertainty. This fire had not learned—yet—how to use its malice.

Jetta closed her eyes, drawing reassurance from the quicksilver feel of the Dance shivering like a lightning storm along her skin. It all but shoved her straight up off the littered floor to defy the fire eye to eye where it roared over her head; she moved, a quick step and turn into the heart of it. Time now was precious, before the fire learned to call its terrible parent. Now, while a Third Rank master could still hold it alone, now while the Dance ran in her like a flood, the only flood that could tame heartfire.

She aimed for the door across the room, knowing where the screams had come from; she had run the halls of this place since she was a child. She leaped a small flame chewing at the floor, spurning the blackening spot to plant both feet on solid stone beyond. Flame spat at her; belatedly she remembered the meaning of the positions her body shaped without thought, and made a barrier of one leg stretched behind her, toe touching the littered floor, threatening the flames behind her even as she bent her arms into the open crescents that would trap flame into a tight, contained circle in front of her. The fire retreated instead, fleeing toward the walls.

Jetta smiled grimly and straightened. Ruddy light reflected dully off the leather hip guard

and breastpiece that were her only garments and played along skin turned a deeper gold by the light, catching red gleams from the silver promise bracelet around her right wrist. Heat scorched up around her but did not touch her any more than the light burned her. Smoke coiled around her, chains that did not know—yet—how to trap and bind a Firedancer. It breathed jets of flame toward her but she spun away into the heart of it, fearless now, caught into the most ancient rhythm of her people. The Dance pounded in her blood, driving out heat and fear, smoke and memory, quelling her awareness of malice and binding the infant hostility of this fire to her will.

She stepped into the third movement, sweeping almost to one knee, hands at face level and touching at the wrists, fingers spread to form a bowl. With supreme arrogance Jetta filled it with fire torn from a licking tongue of flame that tried to curl over her head, and gazed through a shimmering crimson ball at its parent. The fire shied back in confusion. Jetta, cool as river water now, launched herself up and flung her hands wide, dispersing the flame to sparks. Flames sank and scattered, leaving a clear path to the door.

Another step and leap, and she was across the great room and into the corridor beyond, reaching for the door of the nursery where old Minna had cuffed and applauded the stray brats roaming here as impartially as she had her own grandson Kori. Jetta shoved the hot wood of the door aside with the heel of her hand. Smoke and flame curled out of her way, exposing a small boy standing rigid in the center of a tiny clear space, short legs spread, guarding a smaller figure yet, who cowered and sobbed in abject fear.

*Her screams, not his.* Nekka would never make a Dancer, but Tekkorin—there was a different matter. He had the gift, right enough, and the fire had not yet taken his nerve.

*Minna would approve this child.*

The boy's gaze found her through the smoke, childish blue and wide with fear in a small, grimy face. Relief flooded his expression, but he did not lower his arms from their half-instinctive, half-trained barrier stance.

“Good, Tekko!” Jetta called. “Stay as you are. I have this now.”

With deliberate speed she danced, turn and turn again in a widening circle around the children. The girl had stopped screaming and was watching her now, her eyes streaming tears from the smoke, her face red and running with sweat. Tekkorin's skin was as dry as Jetta's, though he was gasping from heat as much as effort. Jetta felt neither heat nor the acrid bite of smoke in her lungs. The Dance sustained her, a weapon forged over eons to balance the hunger of the Ancient: Dancer against flame, builder against destroyer, order against chaos. With each step the flames drew back, and everywhere her foot touched the fire died for an arm's length around. She began to sway, feet planted solidly on stone perilously warm underfoot. Straining outward to the farthest extent of her arms, she shoved the fire farther and farther from the children. With the flames in retreat she followed, stamping each foot down, the shock of it jolting power through every nerve, building and building until it felt as though it must flash out and consume fire and house and all. Jetta held onto it, building the shell of protection around the children, forcing the fire back. She moved on instinct and memory of this room, her head thrown back to eye the ceiling, spinning at every third step to prevent a bold rush. In one round of the room the fire sank to half the height of the walls; in another the space was clear, dark where it had been full of burning light.

“Tekko, come!” Jetta called, her mind stretching beyond the wall to the fire in the hall, which was trying to launch a new assault.

Without a word Tekkorin snatched the girl up by one arm. She came, stumbling but determined now that the way to the door was clear. Jetta leaped into the doorway. Fire had reclaimed the path she had forged to this spot, surprising her. Flame was rarely so bold, to claim a Dancer’s footsteps. But then she heard the roar, a deep vibration more felt than a sound in the ears, underlying the sharp crackle of the flames running up the walls. Laughter.

“Jetta!” It came out a frightened wail, terror from Tekkorin at last. Truly the gift ran deep in him if he could sense the coming of the Ancient at his age.

Flames ran together in the center of the room, rearing up higher than her head. Jetta hesitated, seeing a *hysth* forming beyond the swirl of black smoke and the strange thickening of the air lent by the Dance. In a moment it would be living flame, able to understand its own malice—and do something with it. She brought her hands up, clenching her fists to pull the flames into an impotent knot, but the *hysth* was faster. It turned from hot red to pale gold in a breath, shading to white at its heart, working itself into a doorway for the Ancient lurking in the deeps. Everywhere, stone groaned under the heat and began to hiss and crumble as the proud and perilous windstone gave up its air. A section of ceiling fell from the far corner near the door, priceless carvings shattering apart into a chaos of blackened wood. Anger exploded through Jetta, seeing something she loved taken forever by a thing without soul.

She leaped recklessly into the center of the great room, spinning as she went, so that her hands made the warding gesture of the Third Rank master’s Dance in a full circle before she landed lightly astride a small flame racing for the safety of the *hysth*. But the *hysth* refused the smaller red flame and fled before her, leaving its younger brother to die in a curl of smoke. The deep roar changed to a thinner crackle, its malice transmuting abruptly to fear. The *hysth* wavered, faded from pale gold to red, and lost its nerve. It retreated into the porous stone walls, dying to sparks and then to nothingness as Jetta’s dance drove it back to its spawning ground. Abruptly the room was filled with smoke and nothing more, heavy amid an acrid stink of scorched stone and blackened wood.

“Tekko, the door!”

Tekkorin grabbed the girl and ran for the front door, where hands snatched them through into clean air and sunlight and safety. Slowly Jetta let her dance wind down, stepping lightly between hole and hole in the floor. With bare feet and palms held flat as a barrier, she drove the fire deep into the ground where it always slept, waiting for carelessness, for a lapse in the watchfulness of the folk who lived in the air it craved.

Finally, deep in her bones, she sensed victory, a lessening of the quivering, fizzing sense of fire in proximity. This upstart youngster was beaten, licking its wounds in some deep crevice far below her, hiding from the Ancient, which would not welcome this setback. Another skirmish in a long, long war was over.

Abruptly the weariness hit her, the inevitable aftermath of the Dance. Jetta stopped in the middle of the littered, blackened great room, drooping like a wilted flower. Dimly she heard someone shout, and pounding footsteps. A hard-muscled arm slid around her waist and bore her up, and then sunlight touched her face along with a cool breeze clean of fire stink.

*Kori*, she thought, but that wasn't right; *Kori* was dead. Suddenly her arm hurt, and her leg; raw red pain licked like the very fire deep into her body. Jetta screamed and fought the hands trying to soothe her. She wrenched free, overbalanced, and crashed to the hard-packed dirt of the square in a graceless sprawl, setting off a sudden alarmed babble over her head.

She scuttled backward, seeing nothing but flame. Strong fingers seized her chin, halting the frantic thrashing of her head. "Jetta! Stop it! You are out and safe! Jetta ak'Kal! Stop it!"

The voice penetrated, ringing along familiar pathways. Jetta froze, looking up into a pair of intense dark eyes as hard as containment stone. "Farahk ak'Kal," she gasped.

He released her. "Is your mind your own, ak'Kal?"

Shakily she nodded, and sat up, drawing her knees into an instinctive barrier. Farahk's eyes narrowed; Jetta caught herself huddling and surged to her feet, shaking off the memory of pain and loss still tender after a year.

Faces framed in charcoal hair, bodies in the deep reds and yellows of the Fire Clans, surrounded her. She looked up at her neighbors, villagers she had known all her life, and bit her lip, groping after the professional calm a Third Rank master should never lose. They crowded back, breaking the circle of concern drawn tight around her. Farahk stood up more slowly, hard muscles rippling in the late afternoon sunlight. It jolted Jetta to see him dressed in the brief leather hip guard of a Dancer with its protective flaps guarding buttocks and groin, his legs and upper body bare of anything the fire might snatch. His flowing black hair, like hers, was braided up tight and bound with a thong at the nape of his neck. Wide dark eyes met hers. Jetta stared, first in realization, and then embarrassment. Hot color flooded her face.

He waved impatiently at the gawking villagers. "It's done here. The fire's out, thanks to Jetta ak'Kal. Go and see what can be salvaged. Take Nekka to her parents and see to Tekkorin."

People scattered without objection. Quite apart from being a Fifth Rank master, Farahk seldom brooked being questioned. Hands brushed Jetta's shoulder in passing: silent thanks, appreciation, and then they were gone, and she stood alone with Farahk in an awkward silence.

"So," he said.

Stubbornly she looked away. Firin's house oozed acrid-smelling smoke out the fire-shattered windows facing the square; the roof of the great room bore a gaping hole, but the majority of the sprawling hall stood untouched, its opalescent walls gleaming in the golden light. The rest of Firehome still dreamed in the sun, a scatter of arrogant white stone and wooden roofs crowning a hill shaped like flame itself. The vulnerable trees of the forest formed a scantily-tamed green circle a hundred paces from the nearest walls, far enough the Ancient could not use them against the village. At the far end of the valley the sun hovered low over the hills, turning the river and the high falls pouring over the Guardian Ridge to silver. Tall hills hemmed the wide green bowl, dreaming in quiet peace, lush and verdant like no other place in ten leagues, for here fire walked with caution, and rarely. This was Firehome Vale, clan home to the Fire Clans. Every third person here was a Dancer.

Farahk's hand touched her shoulder. "Jetta."

The hard edge had gone from his voice. She turned, caught in spite of herself. Their eyes met, alike in the liquid blackness of mastery, as their faces bore traces of common ancestry in the wide set of the eyes, the winged dark eyebrows, the narrow nose and flat, hard lines of cheek and

jaw. She saw compassion in his face, and flushed, caught all sideways.

“So you are not as well healed as you thought,” he said quietly.

Jetta looked up, her pride caught. “I did what was needed! The fire is driven deep, and Firin’s house is still standing. And the children live.”

“Indeed. You did well.”

“But still you were set to come in after.” Bitterness edged her voice.

“Were it needed, yes. Should the children have died for your pride?”

“How long have you had someone standing my watch behind my back?”

“You have not been cleared by the Circle again to work alone. Surely you knew that.”

“I—” But she had known; she had just refused to think about it, as so much else of this past year was forbidden territory. Of course her credentials were gone; no one trusted a Firedancer who had failed her task. One dead village to her credit was enough.

Jetta stared at the ground, absently rubbing her left arm. He caught her hand, raising it when she snatched her head up, startled. Farahk only looked at her, still holding her wrist quietly. Jetta flushed again and wrenched away.

He ran a light finger down the unmarked golden skin of her arm. “It healed well.”

“Dancers always heal well. And the Water Clan healers are adept. No scars.”

“No scars *outside*.”

She met his eyes. “I am ak’Kal of the Third Rank! I’m not afraid!”

“Yes, you are.” His voice was so matter-of-fact it quenched her anger as though he had danced it away. “You conquered it today. What of next time? What when you meet with the Ancient itself? You came out screaming, ak’Kal. The fire has touched your flesh. Did it also eat your nerve?”

Her chin came up. “The Ancient has no hold on me. This fire was malicious but it gained no victory.”

His eyebrow lifted like a bird rising. “So? Then you did better than well, daughter of my sister.”

She drew a deep breath, steadying as he let formality go at last. “It was a young fire, not the Ancient—but it tried to call the Old Man. It tried.”

“Why does that surprise you? Any fire will try if you let it.”

“Here in the heart of Firehome Vale?” She stared. “Since when would it dare?”

“Since when would it dare rise here to begin with?”

Jetta blinked. Since when, indeed? Suddenly uncertain, she stood, squirming like a First Ranker, while those eyes that had seen more fire than half the other Dancers in all the clans studied her face.

“You have great talent, Jetta,” he said finally, startling her, for it was not what she had expected. “Since you were a child it has been expected that you would rise to Fifth Rank, perhaps even to the Circle. I have never seen a Dancer so aware of how a fire will run, of where it sleeps, of its mood when it bursts from the deep. Because of you, Setham Village was fire-clear for full five years. That is a thing unheard of.”

“And now Setham Village lies in ashes because of me.”

“No. You know why Setham died.”

She looked away, her vision blurring with the easy tears of the past year. “Kori,” she whispered.

“Kori didn’t cause the fire any more than he caused his own death.” Farahk’s voice was gentle, but inexorable. Jetta flinched. She did not want to hear this, could not bear to think of that time. But Farahk’s hand was on her chin again, forcing her head up. Finally she met his eyes, furiously blinking her vision clear.

He dropped his hand, a reluctant smile catching up one side of his mouth. “Your courage is intact. Find whatever path will lead you past Kori, and you will yet stand in the Circle.”

“Lead past Kori?” Jetta echoed incredulously. “And should I forget him, my lifemate, my second self, who died because I failed?”

“Did I say forget? But he’s dead, of his own mistake, and if you dwell on that mistake it will take you, too. Or, you will never dance fire again, and then how many will die who might have lived had Jetta ak’Kal had the will and the courage to dance for them?”

Jetta spun away, staring into the sun sinking over the falls. “I will not fail my duty,” she said through her teeth. “Is that all?”

Silence behind her. She waited, hating his trick of outwitting opposition, but it worked nonetheless. She turned to find him still watching her with neither anger nor compassion in his face. He was master now, and she apprentice.

“Annam Vale has requested a Dancer,” he said evenly. “You will go tomorrow.”

“No! No, ak’Kal! Not yet!”

“You object to backing on your watch, and yet refuse an assignment elsewhere? Make up your mind, *ak’Kal*.”

Jetta jerked upright. “Flame has attacked Firehome itself! How can I leave—”

“And are there no other masters in Firehome, with more years of facing the Old Man than Jetta ak’Kal has been alive?”

That silenced her. Even now she could hear First Rank apprentices chanting the histories in the sprawling teaching house where she had learned the Dance. Firehome had no need of her to keep the Ancient at bay. Maybe it was only because *she* was on watch that the Old Man’s spawn had dared to raise its head.

She looked away from Farahk’s gaze. Setham Village lay like an accusing ghost behind her eyelids, a specter of ashes and tumbled walls and screams. Maybe if she stayed, it would be Firehome itself someday. And maybe if she left, it would be Annam.

“If you are not fit to dance anymore, now is the time to find out, Jetta ak’Kal.”

She forced herself to meet Farahk’s eyes again. “I can dance,” she said through stiff lips.

“Then you go.”

*Go with Circle sanction, or just go.* That was in his voice, the thing that happened to Dancers who lost their nerve. Go to the wastelands where fire could find no foothold and make what life she might. When fire rooted in a human heart, it was too dangerous to stay. She looked down that road of bleak wandering, a magnet for the Ancient, welcome nowhere, and swallowed hard.

“Yes, Farahk ak’Kal,” she said thickly. “Is that all?”

“No. Settak goes with you.”

“Settak! But he’s only a journeyman, and Second Rank. He isn’t qualified—”

“To take your place if you fail?”

“Old Man Fire! That’s not what I—”

“But it’s what you were thinking. There’s no danger of you failing here, with a village full of Dancers to catch what you do not. In your heart you know that.”

“I didn’t know! I didn’t know you were there, so why should I have feared failing?”

“Then why does Firin’s house have a great hole in its roof? How is it that flame got such a hold there, if Jetta ak’Kal did not hesitate?”

“It was already well alight when I came, ak’Kal.”

He frowned and looked down his nose at her. “So?”

“Yes!”

A little silence stretched. Her anger trickled into uneasiness as still Farahk said nothing. Abruptly he raised his eyes as if some inner debate had ended. “All the more reason for you to go, then,” he said cryptically. “Settak is competent enough in the Dance. Annam lies in the heart of the containment quarries. The risk is small.”

Which brought the bright blood rushing to her face again, in humiliation this time. “Then why send us at all?”

He watched her unblinkingly through a long moment that cooled her anger and hatched a small worm of doubt in her guts. Something was not right about Annam Vale, and the danger was greater than he pretended. “Uncle?”

He drew a quick breath and let it out in a sigh. “Annam is full of Windriders, sister-daughter. Think on that, if Old Man Fire indeed comes calling.”

Farahk dropped a hand onto her shoulder, a quick, hard squeeze of reassurance, and walked away with the floating, arrogant step of the very top Dancers. She watched him go, hardly seeing him for the swirl of fear and excitement and doubt squeezing her insides into knots. She felt like a First Ranker again, facing the fire for the first time.

Windriders...Old Man Fire, what was she supposed to do with a village full of Windriders?

## Chapter 2

### The Circle's Blessing

Fire. Always her dreams were about fire. Jetta lay shivering in the dim pearl light of dawn, shaking off the lingering effect of still another nightmare. The fine-woven blankets felt like needles against her skin, so harsh that finally she threw them off, knowing it was imagination, that her arm and leg were healed. But the clasp of the blankets went hand in hand with the nightmare of fire rising around her, out of control, a living barrier between her and safety, with Kori lost somewhere beyond it.

She curled into a ball in the chill air, not feeling it. Grief caught her breath into a quiet sob; she rammed her fist against her mouth, fearful of her parents hearing it in their room beside hers. That was humiliation in itself, to be back abed in her parents' house after seven years a ranked Dancer, earning her own way. But there had been nowhere else to go after—when she had left the healers' care in Rrillis Farhold. A Water Clan, that, safe in its stone-free floating village and with precious little use for a Firedancer. No land-bound village would take her without sanction from the Circle; no one risked life and home on a Dancer without clan credentials, and hers had been revoked the instant Kori died. No matter the fault was not hers. She had nearly died by fire, and that was a thing to remove the confidence of anyone not gifted with fire talent.

The chill began to penetrate her bare skin, as heat seldom did. Shivering, she got up and began to dress in stout woolen breeches and leather boots, a flowing silken shirt in the flame yellow of her rank, and last of all the master's badge. She stared at it in her hand for a moment, the three flames cast in silver shot through with gold, laid against a red oval background. So proud she had been to be the youngest Third Rank master ever, so happy the day she had received this badge from the Circle. Kori had swept her up and swung her in circles until she was dizzy, his face alight with pride and laughter, not in the least envious that she had passed him. So much laughter that day, all of Setham Village caught up in the elevation of their own Firedancer, so proud to claim her as their own.

*I wonder, would they claim me now?* She shoved the pin viciously through the cloth at her shoulder. *All they knew burned to ash, and them left to start all over again. Aye, I was an asset to them, no doubt of it.*

“Jetta? Ah, you're up. Here, let me help.”

Jetta's mother came through the door, her unbound hair flowing around her ankles, all but hiding her blue skirts. Jetta gave it an envious look; her own hung barely to the middle of her

back and might never grow that long again since the fire had touched it. Kirana's hair, still black as containment stone, draped her in a living curtain of night. Jetta watched her sweep it back with a practiced motion of one hand and wondered what she had been like as a Dancer, before choosing to give five children to the Dance. Certainly she was graceful and slim enough even now. That hair, a Dancer's defiant beauty, proved that fire had never claimed victory over her.

*Unlike me*, Jetta mourned, acutely aware that every Dancer she met would know of her defeat.

Kirana watched her out of steady dark eyes, looking so much like her brother Farahk that Jetta flushed and looked away in sudden stupid guilt.

"Dreams?" Kirana asked.

"No more than usual," Jetta muttered. "I must pack—"

"Already done," her mother said serenely. Jetta turned a frown her way. Kirana laughed. "*Farahk* saw fit to tell us you were going."

Jetta's face flamed hotter. Kirana sobered and laid a hand along Jetta's cheek. "It's an assignment, Jetta, not exile. Settak is so excited he is all but halfway there in spirit."

Jetta's mouth pulled down. "Settak is a child."

"He's the same age as you. But *he* remembers wonder."

Jetta wrenched away. "See if he thinks the same after half a year walking patrol."

Kirana folded her arms and said nothing. *Just like Farahk*, Jetta thought rebelliously, squirming under that steady gaze. *Who taught them that, anyway?* She caught herself raking her hair forward over her face, hiding behind its dark veil. Instantly she shoved it back and said, "I didn't ask for Annam Vale."

"No. They asked for you."

"By name?" That startled her.

"No."

Disappointment took Jetta, so hard and so fast that it astonished her with its depth. Once, villages *had* asked for her by name and tried to lure her from Setham with honors and promises. But Kori had kept her head on straight, Kori who asked her earnestly if they could do better in a fine house in Fornay than next door to the best baker in two provinces, whose life they had saved.

Tears came unexpectedly. "Ah, Jetta," Kirana said, reaching to enfold her in arms that felt more smothering than loving to Jetta. "They asked for a Dancer, is all. Few know you are no longer under contract to Setham. Some believe you're dead."

"Better so," Jetta said bitterly.

Kirana stepped back, sympathy fleeing her face. "If you *will* feel sorry for yourself, then Annam is where you belong."

Jetta gasped, wounded from a direction she had not expected. "Mother!"

"Over a year now I have watched you grieve, Jetta. Kori was a fine man, and a son we were proud to claim, but he's gone, by no fault of yours. You take his guilt on your shoulders, and that is neither right nor healthy. Were the mistake yours it would be different, but—"

"That's right! Blame Kori for getting killed! Not the nit who let fire into his house—"

"No one invites fire," Kirana said tartly. "Fire is, and fire does. What use for Firedancers if

anyone could predict what the Old Man will do, or put it out with a bucket? It hungers. We watch. That is our purpose, as the Water Clans throw back flood and the Windriders calm the storms. The Stone Clans delve, and without them none of us would live fire-free, so what right have you to arrogance, Jetta ak'Kal?"

Ever so slightly she emphasized the *ak'Kal*. Words curdled in Jetta's mouth. Sullenly she swept up her red traveling cloak from its peg beside the door. "I'm journeying today. Best to begin."

"Jetta." Kirana caught her back as she started to storm past. Jetta flung her a hard look, daring her to keep her hand where it was. Kirana dared. Jetta drew a pinched breath and stood still, wanting wildly to be away, alone, on the road to Annam or anywhere else so long as there was no one to look at her or give her advice she did not want.

"Daughter." Kirana's tone softened, catching guilt into Jetta's throat. Her eyes blurred; she bit her lip, trying to channel away the stupid raw emotions still racking her. Kirana reached up to stroke her shortened hair. "I know it's hard. We all loved Kori. But you can't stay indoors and grieve for him forever. Annam has real need—"

She broke off, biting her lip. Jetta turned her head to look at her. "Why? Farahk said it was built on containment stone. Fire can't eat containment stone."

She kept the part about the Windriders to herself, hoping to force more detail from her mother. Though she had given up the Dance long ago, Kirana had not given up her interest in it; she knew all there was to know about every village from here to the Great Water. If there was something queer in Annam Vale, she would surely know what it was.

Kirana reached up and started to plait her hair, sure sign that she was evading the question. Jetta stole Farahk's trick and simply waited in silence, until finally her mother said, "The upper quarries are all but exhausted. Fire has surged there three times since midwinter. Stone barriers are no longer enough. The villagers are frightened that the Ancient will creep through the abandoned mines and root itself in the windstone beneath the village."

Jetta considered that thoughtfully. Black containment stone held fire helpless; white windstone served as its doorway. The Ancient traveled up veins of it, rising from the deeps on a wave of heat that consumed the porous stone and fed on the air trapped within. Annam faced danger indeed, but no worse than what villages in less fortunate places endured as a matter of course.

"The Stone Clans should be more careful where they dig," she said coolly.

Kirana gave her a contemptuous look. "And you should remember where the stone from their diggings goes." She turned away, abandoning the plait. "Come. Your father is waiting to break bread with you before you leave."

"Mother—" Ashamed, Jetta reached to stop her, catching a handful of ebony tresses. Kirana twisted a look over her shoulder, her face shadowed in a dark fall of hair. "I'm sorry," Jetta mumbled.

"You would do well to remember that clan skills keep us all alive, and Firedancers aren't the only folk with purpose or talent."

She was gone out the door before Jetta could decide whether that was warning or threat. Jetta stared after her, uncertain now what she was traveling toward. A Second Rank journeyman

for helpmeet, and the Ancient burrowing under a village with no experience of fire. Stone Clans that delved too deep in the name of protecting the rest of the world, and Windriders—Old Man Fire, Windriders. A village threatened with fire was the last place for folk who could summon the very thing the Ancient wanted most. Air. The lift of a Windrider child's hand could kill a Dancer on the touch of an unexpected breeze.

Primitive terror twitched the hair on Jetta's neck; fire made its own gales, that maybe no Windrider could wrest from its control. *How are we to Dance with Windriders attracting every stray zephyr into the Old Man's maw, feeding the beast even as we're trying to kill it?*

Anger and fear took turns chasing themselves down her spine. She did not much care for Farahk's idea of humor.

She started to put her cloak on, and stopped as the black, uneven ends of her woefully short hair brushed her arm. Hastily she reached up and knotted it on top of her head. Everyone in Firehome had grown accustomed to the sight, but she would not walk abroad with the evidence of her failure swinging loose for everyone to see.

With her neck prickling to the unaccustomed touch of the dawn chill, she caught up her cloak and went downstairs.

The kitchen smelled of fresh bread and meat frying and the peppery scent of enja tea. Her mother was bent over the hearth, where a captive fire burned sullenly in its black stone prison, lending its heat to the collection of pots bubbling over the flames. Settak sat at the long wooden table, all but bouncing in his seat with impatience to start. He leaped up when Jetta came through the inner door.

"Jetta! Finally! I thought you were going to sleep the whole day away!"

His open, angular face looked as guileless as when they were children, lit from within with a child's excitement. At least he was not setting out in Dance leathers like a First Rank hunting sparks; a sensible red shirt clung to his broad shoulders, belted over stout leather breeches and boots. Soot-colored hair swung free almost to his knees, thick and shining, rippling with his every movement. She swallowed envy, concentrating on his face, and blinked, taken aback by a vivid flash of blue eyes. Child indeed. Father Flame, how had he reached Second Rank with never a hint of fire to darken those eyes?

This *is my partner?* The traitor thought crowded into her head and would not leave. Ashamed, confused, she tried to rally to the friendship they had shared growing up. "Are you *still* the first one out of bed every morning? Father Flame, Settak, some of us need sleep!"

"You never were any fun in the morning. Wake up! This is exciting!"

"Exciting how? It's a long walk and a bunch of strangers at the end."

Settak rolled his eyes. "Feed her, Kirana ak'Kal. Maybe it will improve her temper."

"Doubtful." Kirana smiled at him and handed Jetta a cup of steaming tea that smelled of flowers. "Drink that. Settak, will you *stop* pacing? Sit and eat before you wear a hole in my floor."

"Sorry." Settak plumped down at the table, unabashed.

Jetta sighed, watching him twiddling exuberantly with the plain double flame badge of his rank. After a moment he leaped up again, too restless to sit, and bent over an enormous pack beside the door. Jetta almost laughed; he was going to wilt in the first hour on the road. She met

her father's grave dark eyes, and a look went between them that touched a smile to Vettahr's mouth before he turned courteously to Settak. Jetta slid into a seat, reaching for the hot bread on the platter beside her father.

"Are you sure you have everything?" Vettahr asked Settak, straight-faced.

"Well...perhaps I should have brought that coil of rope after all. The road may not be good just now, with the snowmelt running. Do you think I should go get it?"

Earnest eyes lifted to Jetta's. "I...think we will do fine," she said, and stuffed a piece of bread into her mouth before she laughed in his face. It seemed impossible that she and Settak were the same age; that they had entered the First Rank together twenty years ago. No one could doubt his enthusiasm, but the gift ran erratically in him, driving both him and the masters mad with his uneven grasp of it. Through sheer determination he had achieved Second Rank, which realization sobered her, though she still wondered how he could be so excited about a simple journey to another village.

*But it is his first journey*, she realized slowly. *His first assignment. His first chance to prove himself.* She remembered her own wild excitement when she had been assigned to Setham, and Kori's patience with her. Sadness touched her; determinedly she lifted her head and smiled at Settak.

"Perhaps we should go through our bundles and see what we forgot." She caught her father's wry wink, and knew that half of Settak's pack would mysteriously disappear in the re-packing, while her own small bundle undoubtedly bulged with all the things her mother had included that Jetta no longer cared about. She had no doubt that a dress or three would show up when she unpacked in Annam, and sighed, knowing equally well there was no point fighting it. Dance leathers and good wovens were all she needed; her mother's stubborn attempts to turn her back into a woman were pointless. She was a Firedancer, not a catch for some footloose Stone Delver.

Eventually only scraps remained on the plates. She could not face more tea, and Settak was about to explode with impatience. The sun stood well up in the clear sky, throwing long bars of light through the eastern windows. Firin's scorched house drew her eye. Her lips tightened.

"Will he replace the Fornay carvings, do you think?" she asked.

Settak stared, but Kirana said serenely, "I expect so. Firin's not one to have anything out of place for long."

"How did it start?"

Settak threw her a quick, startled look. "You don't know?"

Jetta's shoulders hunched. "I...was at the far end of the village when it began. I...heard the alarm..."

A small, awkward silence fell. Jetta's guts knotted. Settak looked troubled; her mother bent her head to let her hair fall across her face. Her father was examining his plate as if the pattern fascinated him. *Should I have felt the Old Man crawling up through the walls?* Jetta thought in helpless fury, but the simple answer was yes, she should. It was how she had kept Setham fire-free for so long, because she always *knew* when the Ancient was stirring, knew when fire began to creep up from its hiding places underground, daring to test the containment wall around the village, trying to root in the fields before anyone could see. Even as a tiny child she had run to

watch, fascinated, until the masters realized, and began to follow Vettahr's youngest child on her seemingly random rounds. They had ambushed the Old Man time and again, until at last the fire lay sullenly quiescent in some underground hole. Firehome Vale had been free of flame for sixteen years. Until yesterday.

*Why didn't I feel it?* she wondered, chilled. It was a gift that had never failed her, so reliable that she and Kori had not shared other Dancers' exhausting grind and haunted sleep, turn and turn about, on constant watch against the first tentative spurt of flame. They had slept soundly, and together, safe in the sure fire sense that had awakened them on countless occasions in time to beat the Ancient to its chosen attack point. But yesterday she had felt nothing.

No wonder the Circle kept a second Dancer on her watch.

She thought of the doorway of Firin's hall, framed in fire. She had not hesitated until she was inside, nor even thought about the fact that the flames had so firm a hold. She had gone in, because it was in her blood to do so, because a lifetime's training had forced any other thought out of her head. But it had been years, she realized slowly, since she had been forced to brave a room so full of flame. Her gift had spared her that, all those years in Setham. The *hysths* she had fought in her life had been many but generally small. Until the night Kori died. Until that one, unforgettable fire, a wall of living flame between her and her love, the scattered *hysths* running not from the Dance, but to join and meld into one huge *hysth* that had eaten everything.

She flinched from the memory. Vettahr jumped and looked up. "You did well yesterday," he said, and set down his cup. "I expect Annam Vale is getting better than they deserve."

He stood up as Jetta fought a sudden lump in her throat. "Shall we look at those packs?" he asked Settak, and took him outside, snatching up Jetta's small bundle as he went. Jetta stood to help her mother clear the table.

"No, go on," Kirana said quietly, drawing her into a fierce hug. "Take care. Dance well."

"I-I'll try."

"You will do better than try. The gift is still there."

"But...Firin's—"

"If you didn't feel the flame coming it's because you did not want to. Think on that."

"Other Dancers have lost the gift."

Kirana drew back and looked at her. "Is that what you fear? Or what you hope?"

"*Mother!*"

Kirana smiled. "So you care a little, eh? You danced well yesterday. Something remains. Whether all or part, only you can say, child."

Fear seized Jetta's throat. "The Circle will send me to Annam, not knowing if I can do the job? Mother, how is that fair?"

"Settak is with you, is he not?"

"He *can't* do what I do!"

"Neither can you, apparently. Go and find out, Jetta. Go and discover whether the Ancient killed you, too."

Anger flamed up, as fierce and hot as the Ancient itself. Jetta jerked upright; Kirana only looked at her, unmoved. "Go, daughter," she said. "Go with my love. Discover what is in you, and learn to live with whatever you find."

Jetta drew a sharp breath. So even the Circle did not know how much of her gift Kori's death had left her. And yet they sent her to Annam, with only an erratically-gifted Second Rank journeyman to help. Suppose there was nothing left? Suppose even the Dance failed her?

She looked up at her mother but found a Third Rank master watching her. Blindly Jetta turned for the door.

"The trick to Windriders is to keep them in sight," Kirana said quietly behind her.

Jetta spun around but Kirana had her back to the door and her hands full of crockery. Jetta knew the warning was all she would get, and perhaps more than anyone was authorized to say. Whatever test the Circle was imposing upon her by sending her to Annam, it was about more than a Firedancer winning back her credentials. Much more.

The dawn breeze nibbled at her cheek when she stepped outside, cool with the damp chill of late spring and heady with the scent of the toa tree trailing pink streamers of flowers onto the corner of the house. Black fingers of shadow lay across the white dust of the dooryard, putting Jetta sharply in mind of the black pathways of Setham. She caught her breath and turned away, trying to breathe past the sudden tightness in her throat.

Vettahr looked up from jerking the straps tight on Settak's pack, that had dwindled to a manageable size. He stilled, his mouth acquiring a sad, thoughtful line, and then he winked, his back to Settak. Jetta smiled at him, the ache subsiding into an upswelling of love that seemed to stretch her skin from inside. Of all the people in Firehome, only her father had never so much as asked her about that night, walking for hours with her in silence as she regained the strength in her leg. Their conspiracies ran deep, requiring no words.

It occurred to her that she was about to leave that unquestioning support behind. Once again she was setting out from Firehome, but this time there would be no Kori standing unflinching at her back, equal parts helpmeet and refuge. And this time she did not walk forth with all the world ahead of her and a reputation to make. Now she had one.

Jetta bit down hard on a sudden stab of anxiety and chagrin and reached for her own pack beside the door. Nerves already at stretch jerked her upright with a startled gasp when a clear, brassy note rang through the village and echoed away down the valley.

Settak looked equally taken aback, his blue eyes wide. Vettahr raised a black eyebrow at them both. "Did you think to go with no proper leavetaking?"

"But—the Circle itself?" Settak looked torn between shy delight and outright terror.

Vettahr laughed. "Oh, come, lad. You've known all of them your whole life."

"But—they're the *Circle*." Settak craned over his shoulder, but the solid bulk of the house blocked any view of the square. "They don't come out to wish journeymen farewell. Or even masters."

*Maybe I'll finally get some information,* Jetta thought, less than pleased with the prospect of facing the Circle of Elders on this morning of all. She just wanted to be gone, since she had been ordered to go. She no longer aspired to that hoary society of seven. Not anymore.

She jerked her pack off the ground and slung it over one shoulder, draped her red cloak over her right arm and turned toward Settak. "Best to get it over," she said sourly, stalking toward the corner of the house. At the edge of her vision she saw Vettahr turn to look at her, but would not meet his eyes, plagued suddenly by a foul mood she had no wish to vent on her father.

She heard Settak trailing her as she strode around the corner into the square. It took her aback to see the whole of Firehome gathered in a big loose circle that silently parted for her and Settak. Heads turned toward her. A few of her kin smiled; one or two touched her shoulder as she passed. “Good journey, Jetta,” someone murmured. Her nerves eased a little.

The sun threw long streamers of gold between the buildings, kissing color into the white stone and gilding the tops of distant trees. The glare off the great bronze summons bell in the center of the square all but blinded her. Jetta blinked away tears and dropped her gaze, and so came before the Circle in suitably humble demeanor.

“Jetta ak’Kal,” a soft voice said. “Settak a’Kam. The blessings of the Beginning be on you.”

She looked up. Awe touched her, wrenched unwilling from a frozen heart. The Circle so seldom gathered in public, even here in Firehome. They guided the clan and chose the masters and tracked the Ancient’s incursions into every village in all the world, but one rarely saw them together. It impressed her despite her stubborn refusal to feel anything. They stood, not in a circle but in a line, seven dark-eyed masters in the white of hottest flame, embroidered in all the lesser colors of fire: red and yellow, orange and the dead black of the defeated enemy. The youngest had five fewer years than Farahk, but unlike Farahk, or Jetta herself, his eyes had no white left to them at all, as if the Ancient had burned them out in some deadly encounter long ago. Jetta stood still with difficulty under that obsidian gaze. At least, she thought he was looking at her. She could not see his eyes move.

Unexpectedly, Norlahk ak’Kal smiled. It lit his whole face, erasing even the haunting deadness of his eyes and lending them an illusion of youth. “I had not thought to see the day Jetta ak’Kal came to a summons bell with lowered eyes. What ails you, child?”

“Ak’Kal?” Jetta blurted.

Norlahk looked at Settak standing speechless at Jetta’s shoulder. “Settak a’Kam. Do try to put your eyes back in your head. I daresay you’ll need them before the day is out.”

Settak fumbled for an answer as a ripple of laughter ran around the square. Jetta frowned; this was far from the parting chastisement she had expected. Norlahk stepped forward, startling her again; she had thought he was looking at Settak. He set his hands on her shoulders, a cage of hard fingers stilling any impulse to shrink from whatever came next.

His voice turned deep and solemn. “Jetta ak’Kal, Master of the Third Rank of the Firedance, we send you forth.”

Someone struck the bell. Jetta jumped and looked around at it shivering on its hook, its deep voice rolling away down the valley. Norlahk’s hands tightened, forcing her to look back into that black and fire-eaten gaze.

The bell rang again, tolling announcement to the surrounding ridges, the flawless sky, the green mysteries of the forest and the silent rocks beneath, where lived the Ancient in its long frustration. Norlahk’s voice followed its echoes.

“We send forth a master of the Dance, to Annam Vale where the ancient enemy has dared to encroach on lands flame-free since the Beginning. We send with her a journeyman of the Second Rank, to learn from her and assist her in her struggle. Know this: the Ancient has grown bold since it defeated a master of the craft a year and more ago. It dares even the sanctity of

Firehome, testing the defenses of this stronghold where it has never found root. Since mid-winter, three villages under our protection have suffered losses despite the presence of masters of the Dance. Now the fire explores new approaches, probes at old ones, attacks in ways not seen before. We, the Circle of the Fire Clans, have studied these incursions, but we cannot discern the pattern the Ancient is building. What lies at Annam, we cannot say, save that it will serve you ill to depend upon containment stone alone to keep the Ancient at bay. Be vigilant. Dance well. Report all incursions, however minor. Above all, show no fear.”

*That was aimed at me,* Jetta thought bitterly, but Settak nodded. “To dance with fire is to leave fear at the door,” he said, jolting Jetta from self-absorption back to a childhood spent on the Dance ground, learning the rhythms, the patterns, the unbreakable calm of a Dancer.

“To dance with fire is to leave fear at the door,” she echoed, the words coming unbidden to her lips. The first and most ingrained creed of the Dance.

Norlahk nodded and stepped back. Somehow Jetta sensed that he was looking at her. His head tilted to one side. “Eyes so black so young,” he murmured. “Truly you have the gift, Jetta ak’Kal. I was Fourth Rank before my eyes took on true black. You will do well at Annam.”

“Master, I—” Jetta had no idea what she meant to say. The bell shivered again, driving vibrations deep into her bones. She jumped, felt Settak startle beside her. Norlahk’s head tilted toward the sky, his infinite gaze leaving hers. The other six masters lifted their arms in the first posture of the Dance, palms together over their heads, mimicking the shape of flame. Instinctively Jetta let the cloak on her arm slide to the ground and raised hers in answer.

Norlahk twisted one palm upward. Flame whooshed from the ground beside Jetta. Without thought she shoved both hands toward it, fingers spread, extinguishing it before Settak could so much as blink childish blue eyes.

One by one in a rippling wave the ranked masters brought their arms down. Fire spurted at their feet, a line of crackling yellow flames racing to combine and grow strong. Angrily Jetta nodded at Settak, half-insulted that the Circle should assign her to Annam and then test her on the morning of departure. Settak, wide-eyed, managed to subdue one end of the line. Jetta stamped her foot, driving the other flames into a confused huddle. She lifted one arm, intent on banishing them—and suddenly the fire flicked out, leaving only a thin spiral of smoke and a scatter of soot on the white stone of the square.

Norlahk turned his head, his unsettling gaze sweeping the line of masters. “Not of our doing,” Krailis ak’Kal said, third in line, Jetta’s own blood kin.

“Settak?”

“No, ak’Kal!” He looked as confused as Jetta felt.

“Jetta?” Norlahk looked at her.

“No, ak’Kal.” Foreboding swept through her, dousing her anger like a dump of snow from one of Firehome’s slate roofs. “Not of my doing.”

Norlahk folded his arms. “Then you see. Either the Ancient grows senile, or it grows clever. Either way, it will not act as you expect. I say again, be alert, be wary, Dance very, very well.”

He stepped forward and kissed her forehead, then Settak’s, and handed Jetta a letter to the elders of Annam stamped with the flame seal of the Fire Clans, the precious credentials lending

her their approval. One by one the other masters gave them the parting kiss and followed Norlahk past the summons bell toward the tower at the far end of the village. White robes disappeared inside and the door shut before the silence in the square broke into murmuring and subdued discussion.

Settak turned to her, a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. “Didn’t I say this was going to be exciting?”

### Chapter 3

#### Annam Vale

“Father Flame!” Settak stopped as he topped the towering ridge, staring.

Jetta’s nerves coiled into knots. Already winded by what felt like a climb straight into the sky, she broke into a shambling run and panted up beside him, expecting a conflagration raging below. All she saw was a fair-sized village clinging to a steep ridge across the wide valley in front of them. She collapsed onto a black boulder in exasperation. For eight days Settak had greeted every new vista with the enthusiasm of a First Rank child chasing sparks, gawking at the shy, sinewy black neera of the heights, stopping to smell the snow-bitten highland air, so maddeningly naive she wanted to hit him. He was twenty-seven, not ten.

She gulped down a lungful of the crisp wind sweeping down from the ridge and eased her shoulders under her pack, hunting whatever had caught his eye this time. Behind them, the world stretched away and away, green and rolling, sloping down to the Great Water far to the east. Ahead, the Black Mountains shouldered into the pale spring sky, stony ramparts stark against the blue, hiding in cloud in places. Snow still lay thick on the higher slopes but below, the streams raged with runoff and slender needle trees speared up green from the layered rock of the ridges. Up here where wind and stone fought an ancient war for standing space, the Delver Clans picked their careful way into the earth, hunting the inky containment stone that kept the Ancient prowling in frustration around the hearthplaces of folk with no skill to drive it away.

Settak turned his head to look at her. “It looks so...*unnatural*.” He flung out a hand toward the village that had to be Annam, the end of the road at last.

Jetta had to laugh. “That’s what all villages look like that don’t belong to Fire Clans.”

“Black,” Settak muttered. “I’ve never seen so much containment stone.”

“Get used to it. That’s what they do here, remember? That ridge sits over a whole warren of tunnels and mines.”

Settak looked around at the outcrops of sable stone thrusting through the stunted trees struggling to take root on the heights. The tall, fat trees of the lowlands with their water-laden boles were absent here; these hardy dwarves looked like they had already spent time in the fire, their trunks gray and weathered, belying the delicate needles springing green from the branches. The highest ridge of all rose steeply above the one the village occupied, towering over Annam Vale, a bare black spine of the world, naked even of this tough growth. Indeed it was a different world up here, the Stone Delves’ world. And the Windriders’.

Jetta shivered. A brisk breeze smelling of needle trees and upland flowers soughed up out of the bottom, chill with the coming of evening. Did it really warm to a Windrider’s touch, or was that legend, like so much of the doings of that secretive clan? She had never seen a

Windrider. They were few, the most scattered of all the blooded clans. Some said it was because they had no hearth place, and so were forced to seek among ordinary folk for their mates, diluting the true Windrider blood. Jetta thought it more likely that their own lifestyle betrayed them. How did folk who followed the storms keep any sort of tradition, or hope to surround themselves with the simple joys of home and hearth? And why were they in Annam, of all places?

*I suppose we're about to find out,* she thought unhappily. "Come on," she told Settak. "If we hurry we can make it down and back up again by dark."

He eyed the long hike down into the bottom and back up to the village. "How about we camp and arrive in the morning?"

"Coward," she said without rancor.

"To the bone." He grinned, but she knew he must be nervous. These people had no idea how he struggled for control of the Dance. They would expect him simply to do.

*And me, too.* Quite suddenly, his nerves caught her as well. She found her hand straying toward her hair in its half-truth of a knot atop her head, and jerked it away, clenching her fist. Torn between guilt and shame, she started down toward the stream washing the road at the bottom of the ridge, wishing she could go cloaked in her hair as she had arrived in Setham. Striding along with the black curtain of it whipping in the wind, she had never then dreamed of failure.

She studied the sprawl of houses nestled in a hollow of the ridge across the valley. The size of Annam dismayed her a little; there must be almost two hundred buildings, several streets, and a long tail of scattered houses dotted within the containment wall but outside the village proper. Twin silver forks of a stream split and tumbled around the town itself to north and south, running under a pair of bridges and out through a black containment wall so new the grass had not grown up around its toes to hide the dirt of its making. It looped unevenly around the whole place, a frail barrier against the Ancient, and none at all if frost heaved the deep, fire-laden heartstones into the strip of meadow within. The westering sun caught odd sparks from flecks of windstone embedded in the baser rock all over the hillside, but the houses themselves gleamed dull black in the slanting evening light, their stark outlines broken only by gay blocks of flowers rioting in boxes at every window. After nearly a year amid the proud white gleam of Firehome's houses trumpeting their brazen challenge to the Ancient, this tight huddle of unrelieved ebon walls looked strange even to Jetta's eye. Here, she found not one rebel white house to catch the eye—or the attention of the Ancient.

A memory suppressed for a year struck her hard enough to make her gasp. The houses that had burned the night Kori died had all been new ones, built of windstone in the happy complacency that had settled on Setham Village over five fire-free years under the watchful eye of their renowned Dancer. Tettin and Enni had refused to import expensive containment stone for their houses. And paid for it with the ashes of their homes.

*The Ancient came where it knew it could. It's an opportunist. Isn't that what we were taught in First Rank? It's true. It could never have footed itself in a normal hearthplace so quickly. Kori would not have died had I said no.*

"Jetta?" Settak's voice startled her with its low, wary note of concern. "What's wrong?"

“Nothing.”

“For a moment you looked—”

“I’m fine!”

He reddened and lengthened his stride. Jetta caught his arm. “Setti, wait. I’m sorry. It’s just....”

“I’m not Kori,” he guessed.

Jetta caught a little hard breath. It had been bad enough leaving Firehome by the same road she and Kori had trod six years ago; to walk into a new village that would not even know Kori’s name, as if he had never existed....

She dredged her voice out of the knot in her throat. “Oh, no, Setti—”

“He was a good friend. I miss him, too. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have spoken.”

Jetta winced. “It’s no tribute to Kori to think his friends wouldn’t feel it, too.”

He looked over his shoulder, his night-colored hair ruffling in the wind off the ridge. His eyes looked brown in the slanting shadows, the most intense color she had ever seen in them. “I couldn’t believe it,” he said, “when the news came that Setham had burned, and Kori was dead, and you were in a Water Clan village for healing.”

“The world is full of unbelievable things, a’Kam.”

He flushed. “As you say, ak’Kal.”

Her head jerked up. “Old Man Fire! I didn’t mean—”

“No, you’re right. We’re almost to Annam, and we’re not equals anymore, are we? Best we establish that now.”

“Setti!”

“Jetta, I will never make master even of the Second Rank. You and I both know it. The Circle would never have sent me if you hadn’t been free for assignment. I’m grateful for the chance, however I got here.”

“You’ll probably regret it before too long. I’m not good company anymore.”

“Who said you were before?” He grinned and skipped out of reach, walking backward in front of her as she fought a smile and lost. “Ha! I knew Marra was wrong when she said you could sour milk.”

“Marra should talk. In fact.... I would bet that Marra *has* talked, long and salaciously and about nothing else for a year, hasn’t she? Jetta ak’Kal hiding in her parents’ house, a whole village dead and no one talking about what happened? She was bound to invent something to fill the gap.”

“Trust me, you don’t want to know.” Settak’s voice turned grim.

Jetta sighed. “I can imagine. Let’s hear it.”

“Jetta, really, leave it. You know what she’s like. It’s thirty years since she failed the Dance, and she’s still bitter. I don’t know why folk tolerate her.”

“She’s clan blood, and since the Old Man won’t have her, no danger to anyone, unless she were to gore someone with her tongue.”

Settak coughed and started to laugh. “You haven’t changed, Jetta.”

“I’m glad someone thinks so. It’s more than I know,” she said honestly, surprising a blush from him. She glanced up at the mountains towering over Annam. “Come on, let’s hear it. If

Marra is saying it, every trader from the Great Water to the Black Mountains will have repeated it by now, so I might as well be prepared.”

“Ahhh....” Settak tugged at his knee-length hair, glanced at the black knot atop Jetta’s head, and hastily let it go. “According to her, you and Kori were so busy making love one night that fire sprang full-grown into every house in Setham Vale. Not just the village, mind you, but the Vale, and swept down and consumed everything while you shirked your duty.”

Jetta spun around in the road. “That old *hag!* How *dare—*”

Settak caught her back with a practiced grab left over from their childhood. “Didn’t I say that you wouldn’t want to know? Hold on! We can’t go back just so you can strangle Marra.”

Jetta pulled away and started on, half blind with angry tears. *It was nothing like that!* she wanted to screech to the uncaring sky, but bit it back. She could feel Settak’s eyes on her; he must be burning to know the truth himself, but he just walked on beside her, demanding nothing.

From the corner of her eye she glimpsed his arms in motion, and stopped, taken aback. “What are you doing?”

His hands went on plaiting his own hair into a heavy rope down his back. Swiftly he curled the whole thing up and knotted it at his neck as though he were beginning a patrol. “If the Old Man leaps out at us, I’d just as soon be ready,” he said without looking at her.

“How fast can you shed that shirt then?” she jeered, waving her hand at the baggy-sleeved trader shirt he favored over her own tight sleeves. His mouth quirked up but he just shrugged and quickened his pace, leaving her with the back view of that neat Dancer’s knot hiding his one bragging point.

Jetta’s throat tightened. Even Kori would not have done that for her.

She blinked fiercely a couple of times, swallowed another knot in her throat, and strode after him into the shadows filling the Vale. A fine pair they were to impress a new village.

Even the stones in the creek running merrily through the bottom of the Vale were black. Settak leaped from one to another across the shallow ford and turned on the far bank to wait for her. Jetta came more slowly, picking her way over boulders cooling their toes in the stream, their crowns slippery with moss. A thing of wonder, water, that could trap the living fire in heartstone until the rock cooled past lighting. But not the Ancient. Not even water could tame the Ancient. Only the Dance could curb the elemental fire, and that only if the Dancer kept her nerve.

*I am master,* Jetta told herself fiercely, but her nerves twitched at sight of the black sand sifting into new patterns on the stream bed with the uneven running of the water. Walking this Vale was like tramping through the remains of fire. She shivered, and bumbled her last leap onto the far bank.

Settak caught her with a cheerful, “Whup! The light’s going, but it’s not that dim! Of course, you’d think Stone Delvers could lay a better road, wouldn’t you? This thing’s about as smooth as Marra’s tongue.”

Jetta snorted, startled into laughter. Settak grinned, a faint gleam in the deepening gloom. “That’s better. I’m sure we would inspire great confidence limping in with twisted ankles.”

“Better than not arriving at all, strangers.” The voice out of the dusk startled Jetta so badly she tripped again and would have fallen except for Settak’s quick grab. Both of them whirled to

face the steep bank rising above the road.

“Who’s there?” Settak demanded.

A snort of laughter blew over them like the deep rumbling of gas in one of the Ancient’s lairs. “Firewatch. Who are you?”

Jetta drew herself up, still hunting for the owner of that voice amid the tangled weeds and low brush atop the bank. “I am Firedancer Jetta ak’Kal of the Third Rank. This is Settak a’Kam of the Second Rank. We come at the request of Annam Village.”

“Jetta ak’Kal!” The deep voice took on a tinge of surprised respect. “Here is an unexpected honor. Wait there, please.”

“They’ve heard of you, Jetta!” Settak said in her ear, doubtless pleased and proud to accompany a master of proven reputation. Jetta groaned inwardly. He would not be so pleased when the village elders demanded to know why she was no longer under contract to Setham.

A low crash of brush bending, a crackle of breaking branches and a slithering fall of dirt announced the coming of whoever lurked atop the bank. “They’re not too graceful aboveground, are they?” Settak murmured, then stepped back involuntarily as the largest man Jetta had ever seen materialized out of the dusk. She gawked up at him, tilting her head back to see all the way up the enormous length of him. His breadth matched his height. The width of his shoulders would have made two of Settak. He smelled of damp stone and new-turned earth, as though he had stepped straight from some deep, underground hiding place.

“Jetta ak’Kal.” The Delver stooped to peer into her face, blinking round, fist-sized blue eyes that seemed lit from within. “Hmm. They said you were talented. They forgot to say you were pretty. Such dark eyes!”

Jetta stared. The sun was well down behind the mountains, the night advancing fast. How could he possibly see what she looked like? He straightened to give Settak the same slow appraisal, concluding with a clap on the back that nearly sent him sprawling. The Stone Delver turned back to her, leaving Settak feebly trying to gather what was left of the air in his lungs.

“Rununn a’Kam,” he announced, thumping a huge hand against his chest. “With your permission, I will guide you to the village.”

“Permission? Of course. I would be honored.”

“Then it will be all right if I leave my watch for an hour?”

“Watch? Ah. Firewatch, you said.” Gamely Jetta grasped after a whole set of concepts and rules foreign to the governance of any village where she had ever been.

Rununn nodded, setting shaggy hair flopping around his face. For all his size, she realized that he was very young. “We have watchers posted all around the village, ak’Kal. Nowhere is safe these days. The fire comes at will, and we have only our eyes and our good strong voices to roust the village against it.”

“With what?” Settak blurted, and faded behind Jetta in confusion when both of them turned toward him in the gloom.

Rununn laughed, a sound like rock falling. “This is a Stone Clan village. Clap a trough carved from containment stone over flame, and it flees fast enough.”

“Not very efficient,” Settak said, nettled.

“Inventive,” Jetta said tartly, picturing villagers stalking fire with stone. She shuddered and

turned to Rununn. “Dangerous. I salute your folk for their courage. I saw no burn scars from across the ridge earlier. Delvers must be quick with their buckets.”

“Assuredly, ak’Kal!” Pride rang in the journeyman’s voice. “No fire has lived more than a few minutes. But—” His enthusiasm faded. “—We’ve been lucky as well as vigilant. And we grow tired, ak’Kal. It is hard, watching every moment, living in fear of seeing fire spring up behind you. The little ones cry at night in the dark, afraid the Ancient will rise in their beds.”

“It’s worse than I was told,” Jetta murmured. She lifted her head briskly. “Come, a’Kam. Both of you. The night isn’t getting any younger. Will you show us the way, Rununn?”

“Assuredly, ak’Kal.” Rununn lifted Jetta’s pack neatly off her shoulders before she could snatch it back. “I’ll carry this. A Third Rank master should not come to her place burdened like an apprentice.”

Settak bristled, for it seemed like a rebuke, but Jetta touched him to silence. “Different clans, different ways,” she reminded him softly, gratified to know that the Stone Delvers honored rank across clans. The Water Clans had scant regard for other talents, or perhaps it was only fire that failed to spark their awe. Things might be different if a Windrider found himself stranded among them. The huge, destructive storms from the sea that periodically scoured the coastal lands bare were half wind, half water. Generally it took both clans to deflect them. But fire never troubled the Water Clans’ sleep.

The three of them tramped up the road through an inky night that seemed to arrive faster here on the heights than in Firehome Vale. Perhaps the black ridges swallowed light, or maybe it was the proximity to the stars burning like small *hysths* overhead. They seemed very close up here, fixed and steady, staring at Jetta with hard little eyes. She swept one glance across that burning web and dropped her gaze, her skin prickling with sudden nerves. Walking this ridge toward a trusting village seemed suddenly very like approaching the Circle to dance her initiation into Second Rank. She felt like an apprentice again.

They came to the low stone wall circling the village and the southern bridge across the stream, that led into an open meadow with a row of long buildings on the right, hulking against the dimming sky. Another watcher stepped out of the darkness beside the bridge, a huge shadow silhouetted against the pearlescent riff of whitewater burbling away down the hill. Jetta and Settak both shied back a step but Rununn announced grandly, “I’ve brought them! Jetta ak’Kal and Settak a’Kam, all the way from Firehome Vale!”

Jetta peered up through the darkness, trying to make out a face in the black bulk above her, but all she could see were two huge lambent orbs far larger than stars. *Their eyes do glow in the dark*, she realized with a jolt of surprise, and then squirmed a bit in shame for knowing so little of this clan whose labors spared half the world from fire. In all of history, no Firedancer had been assigned to a Delver village. What need had there ever been?

A voice like a distant avalanche rumbled out of the night. “Welcome, Jetta ak’Kal, Settak a’Kam. Twice welcome to Annam Vale. You are needed. Most of the elders are gathered at the inn, Rununn. Take them there and return to your watch.”

“Yes, ak’Kal,” Rununn said.

Jetta, on the point of starting on, stopped and peered up again at those luminous eyes an arm’s reach over her head.

“Ak’Kal? Is the Vale so hard-pressed that masters must stand watch in the dark?”

“All share the danger, so all share the labor,” the master said mildly. “My name is Nuurn. I shall come later to the council.”

“I look forward to seeing you there.” Jetta moved past him onto the bridge. Settak’s silence behind her told her exactly what he was thinking.

*Why didn’t the Circle tell us it was so bad?*

The dusky solidity of the houses seemed to gather light and bury it. Jetta stumbled now and again on an uneven paving stone, longing for some friendly gleam to spill out from a window onto the night-shot cobbles. But the stars burned cold and dim overhead, and the houses stood shuttered tight against the menace lurking deep under their foundations. After Settak tripped and nearly fell, Rununn seemed to realize that the Firedancers did not share his keen night sight, and slowed his long-legged stride.

“May I help?” he asked uncertainly, setting a huge hand under Jetta’s elbow. “Ayesh keeps telling me that other folk don’t see in the dark, but I seem unable to fasten it in my brain.”

Jetta relaxed in the giant’s grip and set her own hand on Settak’s shoulder to steady him. “Ayesh?” she asked, her ear pricking to a name that had none of the deep, earth-colored tones of the Delver names.

“The Windrider quartered at our house,” Rununn said casually.

Settak missed another stride and nearly took Jetta down with him. He stopped dead in the street, staring over her head at Rununn. “Windriders? Here?”

Belatedly it occurred to Jetta that in her brooding annoyance with Settak over the past eight days she had not shared what Farahk had told her about Annam being full of Windriders. Rununn turned his head, his cerulean eyes blinking in mild surprise. It looked to Jetta as though someone had shuttered the moons.

“Yes. Three winters now. They have taken lodging all over the Vale, since the inn was not large enough to hold them all.”

“Father Flame!” Settak whispered. “Jetta...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jetta said tartly. “Rununn, is it far to the inn?”

“Eh? No, it is just there.” His arm shot out, a black bar against the spangled sky, pointing at an anonymous building somewhat bigger than the rest, two doors farther down the street. Sadly Jetta missed the cheerful spill of light from Setham’s merry travelers’ rest, the music and the laughter that had shed its untroubled ambiance half the length of the main street. All gone now.

She lifted her chin and followed Rununn down the street and in at the door of Annam’s inn. *The Stone Cup* said the sign swinging above the arch of the doorway, a quick glimpse caught as the door opened and light shot into the street as though attacking the night. A wave of warm air that smelled of burli brew and woodsmoke, bread and roast meat and deep stone caverns rolled out with it. Settak coughed; Jetta, blinking, just had time to note that even the black, cleverly carved door of the place was stone before momentum carried her over the threshold into a sudden pool of silence within.

“The Firedancers!” Rununn announced to the room at large, sounding absurdly pleased with himself. “Jetta ak’Kal and Settak a’Kam. They passed my watch post just at dusk.”

“And needed you to show them the way up the only road?” a deep voice said from somewhere by the hearth across the room. Jetta winced, but Rununn answered with dignity, “Of course. Did you not raise us to honor ak’Kal?”

A deep rumble swelled in the room, vibrating the very stone under her feet. For a horrid instant Jetta thought that the Ancient was beating at the floor, until she recognized laughter, a sound like mountains falling. She looked around, squinting against the aureate glow of oil lamps burning in bright brass sconces along the walls. Stone Delvers jammed the room, most of them with their faces turned toward the hearth, laughing at the one Rununn had answered. It looked like a forest of broad backs clad in leather jerkins over green or gray shirts and jutting heads crowned with shaggy hair uniformly the deep black-brown of river dirt. She looked up at Rununn towering beside her and saw a round, unlined face the color of rich earth that she could not have spanned with both hands. Dark hair fizzed around his head, tumbling untidily to his shoulders. Rununn peered back at her in the same instant, and grinned, so untroubled that Jetta took heart.

“He got you, Burrood,” a female voice said.

Jetta looked to her left. The largest woman she had ever seen strode toward her, hands outstretched in welcome. She stood head and shoulders taller than Jetta and yet still lacked a head of Rununn’s height.

“Father Flame!” Settak muttered behind her, taken aback. Jetta wanted to kick him. Still, the sheer size of these people unnerved her a bit. She could have hidden a Fire Clan family under the sweep of those green skirts.

“Be welcome to Annam, Jetta ak’Kal, Settak a’Kam,” the woman said, swallowing Jetta’s hand in both of hers. “I’m Urrana, keeper of this inn and head of the Circle of Annam Vale. You are most heartily welcome here.”

Settak stiffened to respectful attention behind her. Jetta found herself peering up into huge, sky-blue eyes set in a lined brown face that bore traces of an incongruously delicate beauty under its springing cap of curling brown hair. *Good bones*, Kirana would have said. Jetta found herself wondering what her mother would have made of an innkeeper as head of Firehome’s Circle.

She fumbled in her belt pouch for the letter and proffered it into Urrana’s huge hand. “Our credentials,” she said, seeing the innkeeper’s bemused look. “Thank you for your welcome. It gladdens us to find such warmth at the end of our journey.”

“Such a tiny thing as you feels the chill, no doubt,” a deep voice said disparagingly. She thought it was Burrood again, but couldn’t be sure. Urrana threw a frowning glance over her shoulder.

“Talent chooses the vessel, not the vessel the talent,” she said pointedly, drawing another long avalanche of laughter. Jetta sensed undercurrents in the room, swirling at odds around herself and Settak, and wondered if Rununn had been mistaken in his assertion that all of Annam Vale looked forward to their coming.

Urrana smiled down at the Firedancers. “Come to the fire. Rununn, shut the door. Were you born under a stone?” Which drew still more laughter. Rununn flushed, a remarkable effect like the sun rising over the mountains, and took a step backward, one hand fumbling behind him

for the door.

“I—um—must return to my watch. Jetta ak’Kal, welcome.” He fled, pulling the heavy carved door closed behind him. Jetta gazed at it a little forlornly, feeling lost without his friendly bulk beside her.

Settak moved up to stand tight against her back, just as Kori would have done. Jetta, floundering in a sudden storm of gratitude and grief, almost missed it when Urrana moved away, threading a path through the heavy stone tables toward the hearth.

Stone, Jetta realized, belatedly taking a step to follow. Everything here seemed made of white or black stone: the tables, the chairs, the benches under the windows, even the plates and cups. And why not, if the only timber to be had was imported from the lowlands or confined to the stunted upland growth? Still, it seemed incredible that hands so huge could carve the delicate wreath wrapped around that cup there, or the smiling sun above the hearth, inset white in black. *How else pass the winter?* she guessed, and then they arrived at a long table set to one side of the hearth, where huge bodies slid obligingly aside to make room.

The benches stood waist high even on Settak. Jetta envisioned an awkward, undignified scramble to crawl up, only to sit with feet dangling like a child, and rebelled. “Urrana ak’Kal?” she said, drawing every eye again. “Perhaps—”

Urrana turned. “I was master, but no more,” she said, puzzling both Firedancers. “I am an innkeeper now. Urrana will do me.” She eyed Jetta’s diminutive figure against the height of the bench and smoothly evicted a sprawling giant from a low-slung settle beside the hearth. “Get up, Burrood. Our guests have come far and the evening is chill. Let them sit where it’s warm.”

Burrood scowled but stood up, a hulking giant whose shaggy brown head nearly brushed the thick rafters. “Time I was gone home anyway,” he said, and marched to the door without a glance at either Jetta or Settak. An awkward silence settled in his wake.

Settak shifted uneasily; Jetta stilled him with a quick hand on his wrist. Let the Delves take the lead in courtesy. It was not for Dancers to apologize for their presence in a village threatened by fire.

Urrana picked up a poker the size of a small log and stirred up the fire snapping busily in its bed of containment stone. Abruptly she straightened and whirled to face them, the poker still in her hand. “Oh! Perhaps we should not have open flame here like this?”

Jetta laughed. “How else should we stay warm? It wouldn’t dare leap out at *me*. And it does a Dancer’s heart good to see her enemy dancing to another’s tune, good Urrana.”

Laughter bloomed in the inn again, erasing the chill of Burrood’s departure. The innkeeper beamed. “Good! I never gave a thought to that. Will you sit now, Jetta ak’Kal? There is food warm in the kitchen, and burli in cups small enough to fit your hand. We have had much practice of late in making things to smaller scale.”

Jetta sank gingerly onto the stone settle, prepared to find it unkind to her tired bones. It had no hard edges, only gently turned curves that seemed to enfold her as if the chair had been shaped for her alone. She watched Settak trying out the other end of the long seat, and saw from the subdued amazement in his face that the same phenomenon had found him as well.

A sly chuckle rumbled through the room. She looked around into a sea of broad faces watching her, all huge sapphire eyes and masses of brown hair. The gleam of silver pins

anchoring thick locks marked a few women scattered among the tables. Jetta smiled back, aware of a joke hovering. “Is this how you lure folk to stay the night, Urrana? I’ve never sat in such a comfortable chair.”

Urrana’s laugh soared above the deeper rumble of the men. Again it sounded like mountains shifting, but the faces looked pleased. “These layabouts scarcely need encouragement to stay, ak’Kal.”

A pair of youngsters, one girl, one boy, swept out of a door in the back of the room, their hands full of trays laden with plates and cups, pitchers and bowls giving up delicious aromas. They were neither of them past childhood, Jetta guessed, but either of them would have towered over her. They hurried through the crowd, their eyes flicking nervously from the trays to the Firedancers and back again, the pair of them clearly torn between curiosity and a healthy fear of dropping something. They were so alike that Jetta thought they must be brother and sister, both with the same underlying grace to their bones that marked Urrana. The innkeeper herself confirmed their ancestry as they came hurrying up.

“Mind that pitcher, Rinood! Will you dump the wine on the guest and feed the bread to the fire? Mururrn, it is customary to let the guest fill his own plate. How did children of mine turn out so brainless, eh?”

But her voice held no malice, and she reached to give the girl Rinood a hand as the heavy tray tilted, setting the pitcher sliding toward the fire. Jetta rescued the endangered bread and handed it to Settak, whose lips twitched madly as he took plates and cups from Mururrn’s huge hands, which seemed unable to quite grasp anything so small. Cheese, hot spiced meat that smelled wonderful, and sliced yellow noda roots rolled in what looked like crushed nuts all ended in stone serving dishes on the bench between Jetta and Settak, flanked by an array of cups and plates scaled to ordinary hands. Rinood and Mururrn stood back, trays empty, anxiously watching the Firedancers.

Jetta smiled at them. “Thank you. Well-served. The food looks wonderful.”

Huge eyes blinked in unison, and then twin smiles lit their faces. “There,” Urrana said, her voice more fond than chastising. “I told you the place would not burst into flame because they were in it. Get about your other duties now.”

Settak, his mouth full of crusty warm bread, stopped chewing to stare. Jetta watched the children scamper away, an amazing sight with bodies so large, and looked up at Urrana in dismay.

“Were they truly afraid of us?”

Urrana waved a dismissive hand. “Like half the village, they are ignorant of strangers. They’ve seen only a few trader folk come for the containment stone, and the Windriders. Firedancers and Water Clans were tales to them. Strange tales, at that.”

“But not now,” Jetta said clearly.

Urrana sank onto a bench beside the fire. Jetta became aware that the room had taken on a listening hush as faces turned toward them. Eyes glowed queerly from the shadows at the far end, winking like stars seen through shifting leaves. Broad shoulders seemed to shuffle together into a solid wall between her and the door. She forced herself to keep on eating. Annam Vale had invited them. Surely there could be no menace here but from the Ancient.

Urrana threw a slow look around the room. A flick of an eyebrow brought one giant to his feet to stand beside the closed kitchen door; another barred the outer door to block any latecomers. A chill crept down Jetta's spine. It spread as Urrana turned her wide and troubled gaze on her.

"We are all masters here, Jetta ak'Kal, save for Settak a'Kam, and he must hear this. We would wait until a more civilized hour and allow you to rest before holding council, but you must know what you face before the Ancient takes a notion to strike again. We have no knowledge of fire's ways, and glad we are to see the pair of you this night."

Jetta reached steadily for one of the noda roots, wishing Settak would quit staring as though the Ancient loomed in front of him. The cold had congealed somewhere in her own mid-section. These people were terrified. Old Man Fire, what had the Circle sent them into?

"The Circle at Firehome said the Ancient has crept into the abandoned tunnels beneath Annam," she said, to break the hush. "Rununn said it's likely to spring up anywhere at any time, and that you've been chasing it with stone buckets. I commend your courage, masters. Please tell me—when did this start, and how is it that you came to call upon other clans to assist you?"

Thus obliquely she asked for an explanation for the Windriders in the Vale, and the large chunk of the story the Circle had so thoughtfully left out.

Urrana sighed and fixed huge eyes on Jetta. "Mind, ak'Kal, there is no great secret here, but the danger is worse than the village knows, and so we are careful of who hears. Some believe stone business is for Stone Delvers alone, and scorn help from outside. Burrood is only one. Many do not believe the Ancient could find a way to attack a village made all of containment stone."

"But surely if the danger is so great they must see it for themselves?" Settak blurted out.

"They have seen scattered incidents of fire quickly dealt with. They have not seen what three masters of this Circle have seen: the Ancient itself roaring in a long-disused tunnel in an abandoned mine."

Jetta felt as if someone had doused her in cold water. Settak sat equally frozen beside her, his hand suspended mid-reach for more bread. "Tell me," Jetta said, and marveled that her voice was so calm.

Urrana nodded, looking steadier than a few moments ago. "It started eight moons ago. Leaf fall in Annam is a strange time for the Ancient, I would have thought, with the snow already gathering on the heights. There are many abandoned workings down the length of the Vale. Some are depleted; others were given up as too dangerous long ago because the surrounding rock was unstable. Men died from stonefalls and cave-ins, and so we moved to easier delving, but there were still rich veins of containment stone left behind. The mines we work are deep, ak'Kal, and delve deeper each year as the upper layers give up their stone. We thought to assess some of the old tunnels to see if there might be a way to work them again this year. So Errull, Rennuhr, and Nuurn went one day to the working at Wind Point on just such an errand. Nuurn."

Jetta jumped, recognizing the name and the deep voice that answered. She had not seen him come in from his watch by the bridge. "We three entered the tunnel," he said, "expecting to see blocked accesses and fallen ceilings, and those there were in plenty for the first few turnings. The accesses to the lower levels were still open, though, and we went down three levels without

harm. But when we cleared the entrance to the shaft leading down to the fourth, we saw a glow and heard a roaring, deep, loud, and felt heat blasting up from below. The whole shaft was full of fire. Even as we watched, part of the wall below us crumbled into the flames and a section of the tunnel beyond us fell. We fled, I am not too proud to say.”

“Wise,” Jetta murmured. “But—if this was last autumn, why has the Ancient not traveled to the surface and burst onto the ridge itself?”

“We collapsed the upper levels,” Nuurn said. “Two are filled with the remaining containment stone from depleted veins on the first and second levels. The last is filled with windstone and dirt, packed tight so no air can pass.”

Jetta frowned. “That is extremely difficult, ak’Kal—”

“We had help,” Urrana said simply.

“Ah,” breathed Settak.

The same thought burst in Jetta’s head. “Rununn says there are Windriders quartered in the village,” she said delicately.

“Rununn seems to have said a great deal in such a short walk,” a woman’s voice said.

“Please don’t blame him. He was most eager to make us welcome. And, as you say, there are no great secrets here, are there?”

An instant of frozen silence, and then came the laughter like mountains breaking. Settak blew out a long sigh of relief. *Why are we chasing sparks around the Dance ground?* Jetta thought, irritated with the whole game. A tunnel full of fire, the Old Man himself from the sound of it, inadequately smothered and left to rage and pick at his prison until he came roaring out in some other direction. Why had the Circle neglected to mention these details? Or had they known?

That thought settled her anger. She lifted her head to stare Urrana in the face. “What assistance might Windriders give in a crisis of fire, short of sealing the caves for you?” She pictured a wind howling into that tunnel, packing dirt and debris into every crevice and rift and crack, sealing the infinitesimal fissures that were all that fire needed to worm its way up from the depths. But her imagination skipped on without effort, picturing the same wind encountering a *hysth*, breathing life into a single tentacle of the Ancient. Fire flaring into a column, a wall, a mountain to rival those around this vale....

She shuddered and forced her mind back to Urrana’s answer. The innkeeper’s mouth quirked in an odd smile. “They’re good folk, Windriders,” she said. “Odd, until you grow used to their ways, but useful to have around. They keep the passes clear for us in winter and battle the storms that threaten to sweep us all into the valley. These mountains breed terrible winds, fit to scour the ridges bare. The Windriders call them gentle breezes, good training for them, who must stand and fight the great storms thrown up by the sea.”

She chuckled. Settak and Jetta stared. “I see,” Jetta managed. “And they’re here. Now?”

“Yes. Is it a problem?”

Such staggering naiveté illustrated to Jetta more clearly than a hundred Circle warnings the real danger here in Annam Vale. These people knew *nothing* of fire.

“I suppose that remains to be seen, doesn’t it?”

Beside her, Settak all but choked on his burli. Urrana gave him an uncertain glance, her vast

eyebrows drawing into a slight frown. Jetta lifted her voice, wanting to kick Settak and not daring with every eye watching them.

“Ak’Kal, what you’ve told me makes disturbing hearing. The Ancient is cunning, and vicious, and takes ill to setbacks. If blocked in one direction, assuredly it will try again. Tomorrow I would like to see what was done at Wind Point and begin an assessment of the other abandoned tunnels. Have you been into any of those since discovering the fire in the first?”

“Yes,” Nuurn said flatly. “They are fire-free.”

“For now. I tell you, ak’Kal, if there is any way at all for the Ancient to advance into them, it will, soon or late. It will try hardest to come here, into the village itself—”

“It can’t!” a chorus of voices declared. A single voice won out. A giant stood up, towering over the rest. Jetta made out a weathered face, ruddy in the lamplight, a great brown bush of a beard and a mane of dark hair cascading free onto broad shoulders. Huge, glowing eyes fixed on her, not angry, but adamant.

“It can’t,” he repeated, and then remembered his manners. “I am Errull ak’Kal, the master builder here. Though we never before felt the threat of fire ourselves, we design and test what others must build. Every house here is floored, walled, and roofed with containment stone. The Ancient would find nothing in which to root itself.” He waved one huge hand around at the fireplace mantel, the stone benches and chairs, the crockery. “Pardon, Jetta ak’Kal, but stone is our business.”

“As fire is mine, ak’Kal. Fire attacked even into Firehome Vale nine days gone. I fought it myself. It was malicious.” And as mouths gaped and shoulders sagged in dismay, she added more gently, “The Ancient grows bolder, good folk. I’ve seen it attack an inhabited dwelling nestled among three others that weren’t. It knows where life abides. It hates living things. It will attack here if we let it.”

“How will you prevent it?” a harsher voice asked. Heads turned; Jetta saw frowns on many faces, Urrana’s included. As Errull sank back into his chair, another master stood, this one shorter, but far broader through the shoulders, a massive barrel-shaped figure that looked as if it could stand against an avalanche. “I have heard of you, Jetta ak’Kal. Trader tales say the last village you guarded lies now in ashes.”

“Enough, Nugurr!” Urrana snapped, but Jetta threw up a hand. The moment was here. Best to face it and get it over.

She lifted her head, letting a little silence stretch. Unwinking lambent eyes watched her like blue stars in the gloom. She turned to face Nugurr squarely, pleased when he shifted uneasily. Beside her Settak moved too, in protest, defense, she wasn’t sure which. She touched his leg to silence him.

“I was assigned to Setham Village,” she said clearly. “Five years and more my lifemate Kori and I lived there, and Setham was fire-free for all of it. Last spring—” Her voice wavered unexpectedly; fingering the silver promise bracelet on her wrist, she forced the lump out of her throat.

“Are you aware that spring is the worst season for fire, ak’Kal? Not the autumn when the grass crackles underfoot and the harvests lie in peril within the containment walls around the fields, but spring, when fire worms to the surface in heartstones heaved by the frost. Left

unchecked, it will fight stubbornly for foothold amidst torrential downpours and burgeoning greenery, race through veins of windstone and burn whole ridges to ash, until it meets some barrier it cannot cross, and rages in frustration until even the stone is consumed. Then the Fire Clans gather and the Windriders summon their power to turn back the storm winds that invariably spawn in the heart of flame.” She gestured around at the village and the untouched green vale. “You have never seen such a thing here, ak’Kal, but in Setham Vale there were old scars on the hills, and we lived at a knife’s edge every day, Kori and I, ever on alert.”

She drew a long breath, aware of Settak frozen on the bench beside her, of eyes brightening and dimming as heads turned toward her or away to mutter to neighbors, breathy murmurs like the wind talking to itself.

“Last spring,” she said, producing a silence deeper than wells, “the Ancient rose without warning and found a foothold in a house at the far end of the village. I had been ill all day and did not feel it come. Kori went to fight it alone. I woke to find half the village in flames, and Kori—” She faltered. “Kori was trapped in a house, trying to save some children. The Ancient—the Ancient was too strong for him. He was only a master of the Second Rank, taken by surprise when the fire turned on him. The house fell in. He died, and the children with him. I was injured trying to save him. A Water Clan healed me.”

A long sigh muttered around the room. Settak bowed his head. Jetta wondered if he had heard the gaps in that story, but she could not—*would* not, rake open all those wounds and bleed for strangers. Urrana’s face crinkled in sympathy, but Nugurr was unmoved.

“You haven’t answered my question, ak’Kal. How will you prevent Setham’s fate here? You’re hardly more than a child.”

“I am a master of the Third Rank! I am warned that the Ancient is loose, and I have a village full of children brave enough to chase fire with a bucket to work with. Will their parents assist, or stand dithering and wondering if their Firedancer is up to the task?”

The silence that time gathered so deep she could have drowned in it. Settak sat as though carved from stone, his eyes two huge blue pebbles that looked ready to fall out of his head. Urrana’s face held no expression at all; not one of the assembled masters, man or woman, so much as twitched a feathery eyebrow. Jetta would have laughed at the look on Nugurr’s face if she hadn’t been so tired and so angry and so aware that if she did, she might lose every scrap of goodwill in this place.

A woman’s snort blasted into the silence. “Sit down, Nugurr. Since you don’t know how to solve the problem, let us listen to someone who might.”

*Might*, Jetta thought in dismay. But at least they seemed willing to listen, even if Nugurr had dented their trust.

Nugurr sank with grudging lack of haste onto his bench. Jetta looked around a sea of faces showing a new reserve in the way they regarded her, and cursed Nugurr ak’Kal for making her job twice as difficult. She itched to stand up but realized in time how futile a gesture that would be when everything in the room only underscored how small she must seem to them. She drew a deep breath and remembered tiny Minna. Kori’s grandmother had been the greatest Dancer of her generation and managed to terrorize impudent children twice her size until her dying day. Jetta drew her legs demurely under her and settled for sitting up straighter on the bench.

“Ak’Kal, Urrana, I am the youngest Third Rank master to ever hold the badge. They did not give it to me. I earned it. I assure you Settak and I will both do our best. If the Ancient wins here at Annam, I will not be alive to know it.”

Settak caught his breath sharply; Urrana blinked. Jetta listened to the words winding through the silence and wondered, half in defiance, half in dismay, *Old Man Fire, what did I just promise them?*

Urrana stood up, breaking the frozen spell. “I believe you, ak’Kal,” she said, taking authority back into her own hands. “We will meet again tomorrow to discuss these matters further. For now, you are guests under my roof, deserving of quiet rest. The rest of you, go. Save your questions for tomorrow.”

She flapped a big hand toward the street door. Without protest even Nugurr stood up, ignoring both Firedancers. Jetta watched him make ponderously for the door, trailed by three or four other Delvers who crowded close around him, their voices a low rumble like the earth grumbling. They disappeared into the night, leaving Jetta wondering if the meeting would reconvene elsewhere to assemble new arguments for the morning.

“Well,” Settak said breathily in her ear. “That was fun. I can hardly wait for breakfast.”

## Chapter 4

### Wind Point

They followed Urrana up a staircase with risers high enough to make them both stretch at each step and in at doorways looming half again Settak's height. Urrana spent a fair bit of time muttering apologies that all the rooms set aside for lowland traders were full. *Of Windriders, no doubt*, Jetta thought sourly, but she was too tired to care. Even the sight of a bed that threatened to engulf her like a child's toy tucked away in its box for safekeeping sparked only an intense longing for its soft embrace.

Alone in a room scaled for giants, Jetta dropped her pack beside the door and made for the makeshift steps of stone blocks leading up to that wondrous ocean of soft comforters and fluffy pillows. Settak's voice behind her startled her half out of her wits.

"Jetta?"

She spun around. "What are you doing here? Go to bed, Setti!"

Settak flushed and came farther into the room, his jaw setting with a stubbornness she recognized from long ago. His hair was unbound, hanging in silky disarray around him, as though he had started for bed and changed his mind. He shut the door and stood looking at her in a silence that crept up Jetta's nerves.

"Tell me the rest," he said quietly.

Jetta stiffened. "You know everything about Annam that I know. I'm sorry I forgot to tell you about the Windriders—"

"I don't care about them. Tell me what you didn't tell the Delves. About Kori. About Setham. The Ancient is beating at the door here. Tell me how it defeated you, Jetta!"

Jetta quailed. "I—" She struggled with it; in a year she had told only the Circle what happened that last night in Setham. But he needed to know. Deserved to know.

Nervously she reached up and jerked loose the thong binding her own hair, spilling it down in a friendly veil around her face. "We were asleep," she began jerkily, raking her fingers through the thick strands, putting them between Settak and herself. "It was late, half of the midwatch gone at least. We never stood midwatch, Kori and I, after the first year. I always knew when fire was coming in Setham. The veins of the Ancient run deep there, and it's a long way up to the surface. We always had time to rouse the villagers and meet it. That night, I didn't feel well, hadn't all day, so we both were abed early. I slept right through the first alarm. I still can't believe I never heard it, never felt the fire coming. I didn't feel Kori get up either. It was only when someone screamed outside the window that I woke and found him gone. The fire...it was in the house at the far end of the street, already soaring through the roof. So strong.... It was malicious, the Old Man himself, and I never felt it coming."

She became aware of her own cowardice, flung her hair back and peered into Settak's white face. "I ran. We always slept in Dance leathers, so I was ready, but—I never saw a fire move so fast. It exploded into the next house before I reached the first. I didn't know where Kori was until I heard him scream. He was *inside* the first house, in the heart of it, with the Ancient all around him. The fire was dead white and so hot...and it was laughing, Settak. A deep, horrid roaring, drowning the running snap up above. I never heard it that way before.

"The villagers tried to stop me going in. Someone screamed it was no use, that Kori was dead. I wouldn't believe it. I went in. The fire was everywhere: overhead, in the floor, crawling up the walls, *melting* the floor, but it retreated from the Dance. A little. I didn't see at first that it was baiting me. I could still hear Kori screaming in an inner room. There were children with him. I didn't know it until later.... And then I saw him trying to get out past a wall of *hysths*. He wasn't dancing. He...."

Settak's head was bent, hidden by a curtain of night-colored hair, but the back of his hand gleamed wet in the lamplight. Jetta closed her eyes tight against a memory seared into her soul. "If he had danced, he would have had a chance, but he panicked. He was a master of the Second Rank and he panicked when the Old Man trapped him. As soon as he saw me he tried to break through to me, and that's when the Ancient sprang. The *hysths*—ah, Settak, the *hysths* all plunged together, just fell out of the ceiling and charged across the floor and up into a wall from floor to roof. I couldn't see him anymore, but I could hear him screaming...."

She drew a shuddering breath. "I tried, Setti. I tried to get to him, but the fire.... Even the Dance couldn't stop it. Or I couldn't. I don't even remember dancing. I think I did. But the fire was laughing. That's what I remember. This deep, roaring laughter, and then a huge flash of flame rolling toward me. The villagers said it knocked me out the door. I don't remember. All I remember was when Kori stopped screaming."

Settak scrubbed at his face with his hair and looked up. "The Ancient ambushed you."

Jetta jerked away, refusing a notion that had gnawed at her for half a year. Legend said the Ancient had been penned in the deeps by the Earth Mother at the Beginning of all things to keep her angry firstborn from eating the world. It was *not* legend that the Old Man was malicious, hungry, an opportunistic killer. She knew in her nerve endings that the Ancient had a will and a purpose. But it had never seemed more than the cunning drive of instinct, like a hungry beast hunting for food. Could it truly be more than that?

"The Ancient doesn't think, Setti," she said, very low. "It couldn't—"

He caught her arm, halting her restless retreat. "Why did it pick that time, eh? Winter was dying. Snowmelt and rain—" He stopped under her scornful glance. Jetta saw him think about it, forced from Second Rank complaisance. Heartfire did not die in water, but burned on until it either discovered it could not spread and retreated into the deep, or died a stubborn and lingering death in cold stone. Enough snow, enough rain, might discourage it, but a river flooding through Setham would not have kept the Ancient from eating what it had already taken.

Settak frowned. "It makes no sense."

Jetta hesitated, with the worst of all jabbing her like a hook in the guts. But this too, he should know, so that he might know things about the enemy the masters had never taught. She caught herself crossing her arms defensively across her stomach and forced them down to her

sides, dropping her gaze from Settak's sudden, narrow look.

"It took me a while to understand. It wasn't until the healers told me why I was ill that day that I knew." She struggled a moment longer, and then finally said, very low, "I didn't know I was with child until after I had lost it. But the Ancient knew."

Settak gasped, his eyes the dark blue of deep water in a face gone the color of old ivory. "Jetta...."

She turned away. "It's past and done. You needed to know. Now you do."

"But—how could the Ancient have known you were ill?"

"Because it came up without opposition. That's all it took. The Old Man is an opportunist, Setti, didn't you listen in class?"

Settak took a long stride and caught her shoulder, turning her to face him. "There's more to it than that." He shook his hair back, the lamplight making of his face a golden mask. "Jetta, it's never been proved that the Ancient is intelligent, only cunningly reactive, like a beast that learns to haunt hearths hunting scraps. If it knew you were with child—Old Man Fire, Jetta, it deliberately trapped Kori!"

"But it would have had no hold if Kori hadn't panicked. So says the Circle."

"Even masters die if the Ancient is too strong for them. Blaming Kori is no answer."

She looked at him, her face stiffening with the effort not to weep yet again. "And neither is speculating about it. It won't bring him back."

"Jetta!" His hands tightened, forcefulness so foreign to her memory of him that she looked up at him in frowning puzzlement. "Think about it. The Circle itself turned out to warn us. You saw those flames depart unbidden. If the Ancient is acting strangely now...what if what happened to Kori wasn't his fault? Maybe he did dance—and it didn't work."

She stared at him, her guts congealing into a ball of ice. "There's a happy thought."

He let her go and stood watching in silence as she rubbed thoughtfully at her arms, more to brush down the prickling hair than because his grip had hurt her. "Why wouldn't the Circle say so?" she muttered, more to herself than him. "They wouldn't send a Dancer into danger unawares, especially if the old patterns of the Dance have failed."

"You heard them. What if they don't know what new patterns will defeat it?"

She shivered. "Another happy thought. You're no fun at all, Setti."

He managed a laugh. "And to think that I thought it was an honor being assigned to a village at last."

A new and chilling thought occurred to Jetta, that she kept out of her face with difficulty. Why would the Circle send a half-capable journeyman and a fire-touched master to a village with no experience of flame to test the Ancient's grip there?

*Because if we fail, they have lost nothing, she guessed. We're expendable, Settak and I.*

Anger flamed through her, but she kept it off her face for Settak's sake. "Go to bed, Setti," she said, quietly enough not to sting. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you before. I—"

"Don't. I just...needed to know what these children have been chasing around with stone cups." He shuddered. "Father Flame, they've nerve at least."

She managed a smile that felt stiff on her lips. "They've got you now. You won't fail them."

He gave her a long look. “*We won’t fail them, Jetta.*”

He released her and took himself out the door before she could summon any sort of answer, leaving Jetta with nerves jumping and no desire left to sleep. She lay wakeful in the clutch of the softest bed she had ever known, staring tight-jawed into the darkness, listening to the highland wind moaning under the eaves.

*Why did they send us?* Had the Circle not known it was so bad here in Annam? Surely they would not risk the Ancient bursting forth to rage unchecked down the length of the Black Mountains.

Those tunnels full of fire haunted her. The Delves knew nothing of fire, had no concept of the danger in leaving the Ancient fretting behind a makeshift barrier of dirt. She pictured the Old Man patting at his prison with hands of fire, probing each cranny, each unevenness in the stone, searching restlessly for a way out, a way up, a path through the windstone that let it travel where it would underground. Any stone that could be heated was a pathway for the Ancient, and only the inert nature of containment stone could confine it indefinitely. Thrust blackstone into the heart of the Ancient’s fury, and it would still be cold when the Ancient had been driven down again. But the tunnels and veins of containment stone were dwindling here, leaving long shafts full of air and shoring timbers that made splendid conduits for the Old Man’s ambitions. Jetta shuddered, picturing the web of deserted tunnels that must run under Annam ridge, under the village itself and no telling how far down into the Vale.

“Old Man Fire,” she whispered aloud, clenching the coverlets in both fists. “It would make Setham look like a harvest celebration.”

The hostility of Burrood and Nugurr set her jaw clenching. *Rifts and factions in a village in mortal danger!* she thought, shivering with anger and dismay. *Could there be anything more stupid than arguing about how to fight a thing they’ve none of them ever seen, with an expert sitting in front of them? While they wrangle, the whole village could burn down.* But pride had precious little sense, even less when fed by ignorance and isolation. The only outsiders most of these people had ever met were traders of no particular village or clan—and Windriders who claimed no home, no Vale; they were strangers everywhere, on common ground with no one. How much less could the Delves understand a Firedancer, when the only times in history they had ever met were when the Ancient was raging loose and lives stood in mortal danger?

She squirmed deeper into the pillows. Her body felt like weights had attached themselves to her limbs, but her brain kept chasing untenable thoughts around inside her skull. Setham. Annam. A house in flames. A tunnel full of fire. Ash-black houses and snow. Water leaping merrily over black sand. Live heartstones trapped under stone buckets.

*And me,* she thought unhappily, remembering how she had hesitated at the door to Firin’s house, with the fire heating her skin and the flames taunting her nerve. The last thing Annam needed was a Dancer known personally to Old Man Fire. It would always know how to find her now.... Whispers from the Dance ground long ago breathed into her ear, shivery tales First Rankers told about Dancers who had been touched by fire and lost their nerve. Forever chased by the Old Man, fleeing its touch instead of standing to fight, bringing destruction on every place they settled.

*No!* Jetta turned restlessly onto her side. *I will not give the Old Man such a victory!*

Surely the Circle would not have sent her here if they thought she could truly bring harm to this place. But the thought curled into her bones like a spark nesting in damp leaves. Maybe dangerous. Maybe not.

Jetta gritted her teeth and refused the poison of *maybe*. She glared into the dark, forcing her mind back to the greater problem. The bedposts caught her eye, stretching up and up like needle trees, save that they, too, were made of stone, carved in fantasies of flowers never seen in the lowlands. She stared at the dark silhouette of the nearest etched against a wall painted a cool white to hide the dull blackstone. If Annam Vale stood on solid containment stone, how was it that fire could burst up at odd points in and around the village? Heartstones worked up with the frost, or appeared when tremors shook the earth and cracked open deep rifts into the heart of the Ancient's territory. Occasionally a farmer turned one up, and fled for his life when it burst into flame under his plow. The stones that contained the Ancient came literally from the world's heart, and bore the living fire trapped there in the Beginning. How could they rise to the top of Annam ridge? Or had the Ancient found another path?

Flesh crept up and down her arms. The Ancient had found its way into tunnels closed for decades, maybe centuries. How? Why now?

That thought kept her wakeful the rest of the night, jabbing her back to consciousness whenever she surrendered to the warm clutch of the comforters. She heard the household start to stir as the first light crept through the wide window, a glory of cool color creeping over the high ridge to the east. Blearily Jetta got up. Without thinking she pulled on her supple old black Dance leathers, worn shiny in places, and then stood shivering in the dawn chill, bemused and a little dismayed by how easily one slid back into old habits. For a year she had worn leathers only on those rare occasions when the firewatch fell to her; just being outside Firehome seemed to have erased the time as though she had never left Setham.

No, more than that. Burrood's disdain took her straight back to her first weeks in Setham, when she had fought the complacency of folk who had forgotten the Ancient's touch. *Must it always be a battle with the villagers as well as the Old Man?* she wondered, exasperated, but it was not the same. Not with Rununn's earnest, worried face in front of her. *He* believed in her, because he had no reason not to. Yet.

Jetta drew a steady breath and stepped to the window, her bare feet objecting to the chill stone floor as they never would to the hottest sands. Beyond the glass, flowers in every shade of blue and purple nodded to the dawn breeze from a box hanging from the sill; enchanted, she threw open the tall panes and leaned out, careful not to fall out over the low sill. All of the enormous black-walled houses she could see wore similar collars of flowers under each window, red and purple, blue and white and brightest yellow, dangling high over any grab by the Old Man bursting from the ground. It bespoke a simple joy in beauty that touched her to the heart.

*I could learn to like this place*, she thought, sniffing eagerly at the clean upland scent of snow and pitch, flowers and dew-wet stone as the breeze swept in, stirring her loose hair back from her forehead. Despite its bite she let it play across her skin, rejoicing in air that held nothing of Setham's dust and cloying stickiness. Across Annam Vale, the road wound up the ridge straight into the sun just peering over the tall needle trees atop the crest, framed in a flat band of clouds flaring in every color of fire. For an instant it looked like black flames licking at

a window, shooting tongues of crimson and gold up to eat the sky. So beautiful it stirred an ache deep in Jetta's gut for the wonder of it. So deadly it made the hair creep on her arms.

*You will not eat this place, Old Man.*

The thought shot into her head and settled like a nesting bird, surprising her with its adamance. Restless images of tunnels full of fire below her feet drew claws of dread through her insides; deliberately she raised her hands over her head, wrists touching, hands cupped to cradle flame, and went up on her toes, her head up, her back hollowed to an uncomfortable degree. She closed her eyes, summoning balance, inner and outer. Her back tried to lock, protesting a ritual long neglected; Jetta forced herself to relax, straining to find the center that had once come so easily. Every morning in Setham had started this way, a deliberate reminder of the Third Rank badge she had earned, a brazen challenge to the Ancient. It shocked her to discover how difficult it had become.

*If Setti could see me now.* Oddly, the thought steadied her, stabbing through to some inner place of stubborn pride. Jetta gritted her teeth and held that first difficult control position of mastery as the sun crept over the ridge and explored her face with a bright finger. The space behind her eyelids turned the color of captive coals on a hearth: safe, tame. And suddenly muscles locked in mute battle against the pull of Earth Mother loosened, their energy flowing into harmony, pulling strength from the floor. The distant mutter of the tumbling stream seemed suddenly louder; the tangled scent of the flowers unlocked into myriad delicate fragrances she could taste.

*A Dancer without harmony is a Dancer doomed to fail,* Minna's tart voice said in her head, revenant of difficult days in First Rank. *Remember the Mother, and she will remember you.*

*The Mother remembers my name.* Jetta stood motionless, perfectly balanced, perfectly in control, perfectly connected to the source of all strength, even the Ancient's. And slowly, peace flowed in, too, welling up like a great, cool spring inside, proof against the searing malice of fire.

Smiling, she spun in place on one foot, feeling like a feather spinning on the breeze. Then she planted both feet flat on the stones and stretched, luxuriating in the feel of every muscle in her back flowing like the water outside, as supple as the Dance leathers she wore.

*So then. One or two things remain.*

How much? Slowly Jetta lifted her arms again into the shape of flame, still feeling that curious, effortless sense of buoyancy. After a moment she lifted her left knee to waist height, balancing on the ball of her right foot. The Fourth Rank position added levels of complexity she had never managed to master at Setham, but, wrapped in the Mother's embrace, nothing felt impossible. For one second she thought she had it, then her foot wobbled. Grimly Jetta steadied it. The muscles of her calf started to scream in protest. Without warning the sense of oneness vanished; the endless, flowing river of energy ebbed away with a suddenness that left her flailing wildly for balance. A breath from toppling she put her left foot down and opened her eyes, staring at the sun standing now a hand's breadth above the trees on the ridge.

*And let that be a lesson in arrogance,* she thought ruefully. She was *not* Fourth Rank, however many movements of that Dance she had learned to execute flawlessly.

Humbled, but calmer, the restless night conquered, she braided up her hair and drew a plain red linen shirt and stout woolen pants over the Dance leathers and pulled on her traveling boots.

Almost as an afterthought she thrust her rank pin carelessly in at the shoulder and went down to the common room.

Settak already occupied the settle. They stared at each other a long moment, and then Settak laughed and waved her closer. “Don’t you *ever* sleep?” Jetta demanded.

“I can’t believe you’re up before midday.” He grinned and lifted a Delver-sized cup he could only hold with both hands. “I could learn to love this place. This is what they consider a wee wake-up drop in the morning.”

“Burli?” She wrinkled her nose, disliking its sweetness, and then sniffed. “What is that?”

“I have no idea, but I want to wake up to it every morning.”

He offered her a sip. Something dark and rich, tasting of spices she couldn’t readily identify, swirled across her tongue and melted down her throat. “Old Man Fire!” she gasped, and tried to steal the cup.

“Get your own!” Settak laughed and lifted his voice. “Mururn! More of this in another cup!”

“Settak! Did Minna teach you no manners at all? Shouting at the innkeep’s son like—”

Mururn emerged from the kitchen, his broad face wearing an ear-to-ear smile. He held a cup to match Settak’s in one big fist and a loaf of hot bread in the other. “Jetta ak’Kal,” he said respectfully, offering her the cup. Jetta took it cautiously in both hands, expecting uncomfortable warmth against her palms, but the stone was cool.

“Thank you,” she said, edging toward the low bench that had served so well last night. She slid a glance toward Settak. “Are we causing you extra work, Mururn? If so, I apologize.”

“Oh, no, ak’Kal! Some of the other guests were up an hour ago. The rest will be down soon. Please. Sit and enjoy the fire. The food will be ready soon.”

He slipped back into the kitchen before Jetta could answer. “He’s harder to pin down than a *hysth*,” Settak said, tearing the hot loaf apart and happily stuffing his mouth. “Oh, this is wonderful stuff.”

“It’s just bread,” Jetta mumbled, but it *was* good, full of unidentifiable crunchy things that gave it a wonderful lingering taste on the tongue. Like the Delvers themselves, in fact, who seemed to linger in the mind even when they weren’t present.

The outer door opened. A smiling young giant entered, clad in brown leather belted with a silver chain. A Second Rank journeyman’s badge gleamed on one shoulder, black with two mountains cast in silver, unadorned with any device in gold. It took Jetta an instant to identify Rununn. He looked different in the bright daylight spilling through the eastern windows than he had in the ruddy light last night: taller, if that were possible, and even younger. The expression on his round brown face, eager and full of anticipation, reminded her acutely of Settak.

He spread his hands respectfully at sight of her. “Jetta ak’Kal. Settak a’Kam. I am sent to guide you to Wind Point. Nuurn ak’Kal says he will meet us there to show you what you wished to see.”

The doubts and worries of the long night resurfaced as nasty swirling sparks in Jetta’s stomach. She kept her face serene. “Thank you. We’ll enjoy the company.”

Jetta watched, fascinated, as hot color turned Rununn’s cheeks a richer brown. Settak took pity on him. “Will you eat with us?”

“I’ve already—”

The kitchen door opened. Mururn staggered in under a huge tray bearing six times what Settak and Jetta together could put away in a whole day. Settak leaped up to help him with it. Rununn edged closer. “Is that some of Uranna ak—Uranna’s spice bread? Thank you for your invitation, Jetta ak’Kal. I *will* join you, if Mururn will bring me a plate?”

The boy’s mouth turned down but Settak winked at him. Mururn brightened and scampered back to the kitchen. Rununn settled on a bench and took the plate Mururn brought back, all but hovering as Settak and Jetta helped themselves to the bread and porridge and thin strips of grilled meat. Rununn went straight for the spice bread and broke off a huge chunk, sat back and chewed blissfully, one knee crossed over the other.

Jetta watched him, amused. “Urrana’s a good cook.”

“Oh, yes.” A reverent look settled on Rununn’s face. “She was wasted as a stonemaster.”

“Why is she not ak’Kal anymore?” Settak asked, trying to balance a huge bowl in his lap and eat spice bread at the same time.

Rununn hesitated. “Well, it’s no secret. Seven years ago Urrana’s lifemate was killed in a stonefall in one of the lower tunnels. She blamed herself, because she had supervised the opening of that tunnel and the shoring of the roof. No one else blamed her. Sometimes tremors in the deep tunnels collapse whole sections. And Anuhr was one of the rare ones, a Balancer. He could always tell when a rock face was ready to fall, and he could stop the nervous shifting of dirt and stone long enough for the rest of us to shore it up. He even stopped a tremor once, like they say our ancestors used to do long ago. He was always to be found in the deepest sections. That day, three other Delves were down there with him. He stayed to try and quell it. They got out. Anuhr didn’t. Urrana took off her badge and opened the inn.”

“Yet she is still head of the Circle.”

“They wouldn’t let her resign *that*. She’s the only one who can keep the likes of Burrood and his cronies in line.”

“Just threaten them with cutting off the spice bread,” Settak said.

Rununn laughed. “That’s closer than you think. She—”

Footsteps on the stairs turned all three heads that way. Rununn leaped to his feet; Jetta and Settak simply stared. A man of extraordinary looks stood there, nearly shoulder height to Rununn, but slim as a reed and so pale of skin it rivaled the snow on the peaks. Cobwebby hair spilled over his shoulders, framing eyes the clearest, deepest shade of blue Jetta had ever seen. He wore ordinary black leather boots and dark blue pants, but his shirt had been cut from some gauzy stuff that floated around him like cloud and swirled even to the slight movement of his breathing. Jetta squinted at it, trying to pin down its shade, but it seemed to mix colors as it moved, changing from pale blue to misty green to a motley of both from instant to instant.

*How ridiculous. He’d go up like a torch if the Old Man came within arm’s reach.*

“Windrider,” Settak breathed. “Father Flame.... Jetta?”

Windrider. With a jolt Jetta realized she was staring and lowered her eyes. Instantly she raised them again, afraid he would think she was some gawky vale-bred just come out in the world. Her own confusion angered her; she watched him over her cup as he came down the stairs and into the common room.

“Rununn,” he said with unruffled aplomb. His eyes swept over Jetta and Settak without interest. “I had heard the Firedancers had arrived.”

Settak stood up. “I present Jetta ak’Kal of the Third Rank,” he said, sweeping a hand toward her. “And I am Settak a’Kam of the Second Rank.” His tone demanded equal courtesy.

The stranger showed no sign of taking the hint. He threw a glance at the kitchen door, sighed, and held out his hands to the fire, though it was hardly cold in the room.

“This is Wyth ak’Kal,” Rununn spoke up, breaking a silence rapidly becoming awkward. “He leads the Windriders here in Annam.”

“Ak’Kal,” Jetta murmured, remembering Minna’s lessons in dealing with cheeky inferiors. “I trust your business here has been successful?”

Languid blue eyes turned to her. “Not yet.”

He returned his gaze to the fire. Settak looked ready to explode, Rununn alarmed. “Ak’Kal?” he said hesitantly. “May I bring you a chair?”

“You would do better to inform the kitchen they have a guest waiting,” Wyth said without turning.

Jetta’s eyes widened. Of all the arrogant—! She found her mouth open before she thought. “From what I’ve seen, the Stone Delvers seem to value self-sufficiency, ak’Kal.”

The Windrider’s odd shirt ruffled and fluttered like leaves on a gale for a few seconds. He turned his head, his eyes narrowed to chips of sky. “It is not for a master of Fourth Rank to scrounge for his breakfast like—” His eyes dropped to their assorted dishes scattered across the bench. “—lesser beings.”

Settak gasped. Rununn leaped between Firedancers and Windrider, who had turned his back again. “Jetta ak’Kal, Nuurn ak’Kal awaits. Shall we go now while the day is bright? We are told clouds and rain will come this afternoon.” By a Windrider, no doubt.

“Surely a Firedancer need not be troubled by a little storm,” Wyth said languidly.

His hand moved. Flame whooshed up the chimney, hot and glaring bright. Settak shied back a step; Jetta whirled toward it in the first instinctive response of the Dance. Wyth laughed and dropped his hand.

“Fool!” Jetta hissed. She turned on her heel and stalked toward the front door past shocked Rununn and embarrassed Settak. Ignoring an affronted intake of breath from Wyth, she flung open the door and marched out into the street. And stopped, lacking any notion where Wind Point might be.

Behind her, the stone door slammed with a satisfying crash. “What a-a—” Settak couldn’t find a word. Jetta glanced up into his flushed face, and some of her own temper cooled.

“No wonder my mother said to always keep a Windrider in front of you.” She drew a shaky breath. “Old Man Fire, Rununn, are they all that bad?”

Rununn threw an apprehensive glance back over his shoulder. “Some of them. Come, ak’Kal. I don’t care to explain to Urrana why we just woke up all the rest of her guests.”

Jetta followed him up between the looming houses, already regretting the loss of temper. For more reasons than one. It was cold out here in the glacier-fed wind and her cloak hung useless on a peg in her room. Beside her, Settak rubbed his arms and said hopefully to Rununn, “Is it far, Wind Point?”

“An hour’s walk, no more.”

Settak grimaced. Jetta swallowed an apology. Better to freeze for an hour or two than back down to that arrogant excuse for a clan master.

The hour’s walk stretched to over two. Once again Rununn had forgotten the difference in the length of their legs, forced to shorten his ground-eating stride. The altitude did them no favors, either. Wind Point was a switchbacking climb up from the village, setting Jetta and Settak panting within the first few minutes. They had to stop often to clear the dizzy black specks from in front of their eyes while Rununn alternately fretted for their health and for Nuurn’s impatience over their tardiness.

“The Ancient—isn’t—going—anywhere,” Jetta told him, halfway up the face of a sheer cliff where the path clung like a stray thread on a sleeve, ripe to be shaken off. Annam village, a scatter of obsidian blocks, lay far below to the right, overlooking the Vale that opened below to the north into a deep valley with the glint of the stream running crookedly at the bottom. Dark mouths of Delver mines yawned sporadically, gaping over meadows connected by the thin line of a narrow road.

Jetta peered up the narrow trail. “Rununn, you surely don’t carry stone down this trail?”

He smiled at her over his shoulder. “We have, but the main access was farther down, until the earth shifted and blocked it.”

More tremors. Jetta could hardly believe it, looking up at the great peaks thrusting snowy heads over the ridge above them, blocking the foot of the Vale where the river ended in a wide lake. Water cascaded down everywhere, shimmering over the flanks of the ridges from the mottled shoulders of the mountains. Black outcrops of containment stone jutted defiantly from thin scatters of trees and thrust sharp horns out of melting glaciers. Those glimpses of what kept this valley safe both disturbed and reassured her—and reminded her why they were here. For the first time since the Beginning, the stone here was not enough.

Why?

The unanswered question gave her mind something to fasten on besides the torture in her lungs and the ache in her legs. She puzzled over it until they finally topped out and stood panting in the cold wind shrieking up from the western side of the ridge.

“Wind Point,” Rununn said, pointing straight into the teeth of it.

Settak made an unidentifiable sound deep in his throat. Jetta, shivering in the bite of a wind that even smelled of glaciers, flinched from the sight of a wall of pale rock halfway down the ridge. An opening like a gaping black mouth faced west. The ridge ended just beyond it as if sliced with a knife, dropping away sheer below the mine into a narrow valley that climbed steeply to the first of the snow-capped peaks. Needle trees carpeted both ridge and valley, leaning into the frigid blast out of the west. Should the Ancient burn through its prison... Her eye traced the vein of paler stone upward until it disappeared over the ridge. Trees and tough mountain grass grew across the top, fuel for the Ancient’s greed—with windstone above to carry the fire all the way up and over into Annam Vale itself.

Imagination fed her images of fire raining onto Annam’s roofs in trails of smoke and curling flame. Unease warred with the peace discovered in the dawn. Jetta shivered again under a chill that had nothing to do with the snowfields above her, and hid it by starting down toward Wind

Point. She hurried, head down into the bitter wind, longing for the shelter of the mine entrance.

Nuurn stepped into sight as they drew close, waiting with arms crossed and no expression on his broad face. Jetta looked up at him without apology. “Wind Point is aptly named, ak’Kal,” she said. “Good morning to you, and might we go inside before we freeze?”

Nuurn’s expression thawed. A grin parted his beard. “Lowlanders,” he said indulgently, waving her past him through the entrance.

Jetta gawked up at the open door as she went by. Solid black stone, wider than six Delvers standing shoulder to shoulder, and twice as tall as Nuurn, it looked impossible to open or close without seven or eight full-grown Delvers to push and pull. But Nuurn set one hand to it as he went and shoved, a very little. It swung back clear to the dark wall behind it.

“How—” Settak gasped.

“Balance,” Nuurn rumbled, looking pleased. “I have no doubt even Jetta ak’Kal could handle this door by herself at need.”

*Let us hope the need never arises,* Jetta thought. She disliked intensely the total blackness lurking in front of them and the way the light seemed to quiver and die a few steps from the entrance. She waited at the edge of the sunlight as Rununn picked up a Delver-sized lantern from a shelf by the entrance. A stone lantern, she noted, black and impervious to the fire it held. She stared at it, marveling at the skill which had carved it from a single lump of rock.

Rununn struck a spark onto the wick. Fire hissed up, captive and angry about it, licking vainly at the stolid walls of its prison. It settled after a few seconds, sullen but steady. Rich, warm light wrapped them around in a golden globe but failed to light the darkness more than a few steps around them on either side. The odd notion struck Jetta that the mine ate light, swallowing it down and giving nothing back.

Settak shivered. “You work all day in such blackness?”

“The working mines have lights every two arm spans,” Nuurn said. “The deeps can be disconcerting even to those who are used to it. Follow, and be careful. The floor is uneven.”

He led off into darkness that breathed out the dank, secret scent of cold, sunless stone, holding the lantern low to light a floor that seemed equal parts windstone and inky containment stone. The lantern flickered in stray drafts from the entrance but never threatened to go out. Jetta hoped its oil reservoir was as big as it looked. The thought of ending in the deep dark down one of these tunnels, with the Ancient lurking in the stone, made the hair on her neck creep. *But at least if the Ancient appears there’ll be light on the way out.*

The thought did not comfort her.

“How far in does this go?” Settak was making a valiant effort to sound nonchalant, Jetta noted.

Nuurn looked over his shoulder. “The tunnel system, or this part of it?”

“Both,” Jetta said, wondering how deep this network ran, and whether it intersected the pale rock at the entrance. And how close it came to Annam village.

“The blockage is just around this bend.” Nuurn gestured with his free hand to where shadows wavered and slid out of their way a stone’s toss ahead. A solid wall loomed on the right, a quick glimpse of faceted stone, then the shadows crept aside and they rounded the bend to confront a mass of jumbled rock jammed floor to ceiling and tight against the rough-hewn

walls on either side. The boulders gleamed black in the lantern light, with no hint of baser stone mixed into the pile. Jetta surveyed the barrier slowly, edging forward over fallen stones and crunchy debris until she stood at the very edge of it, peering down into the hollow spaces between the rocks.

“Packed tight, as you see,” Nuurn said. He swung the lantern closer and poked a huge finger into a dusty space under a rock. “There. Feel that?”

Her skin crawling, for she disliked putting her hand where she could not see, Jetta ran her fingers down a rough-edged boulder until it encountered dirt. She tried poking her first finger into it, surprised when it yielded nothing even to the determined scrape of her fingernail.

“No air trapped in that lot,” Nuurn said with satisfaction. “Impressive sight, that, when the Windriders blew this mess all in together.”

“Rocks and all?” Settak threw a startled glance at the jumble.

“Rocks and all,” Nuurn said. A small smile lurking amidst his thick brown beard told Jetta he was rather enjoying their reaction. “We dumped a lot of it in loose and planted a big boulder in the center of the passage, then moved back. The Windriders stood around for a bit, seeming to do nothing, and then of a sudden the wind came up. Stones and pebbles, *that* was a sight. The mountains fall on me if it didn’t sort of swirl around outside the entrance for a moment or two, and then punch through here like a great fist, shoving the whole mass ahead of it. Kept it up for about as long as it would take to climb back up the ridge, and then it died away. We went in after the dust settled, and the place looked like this, all driven together and packed so solid you can’t sink a pick in anywhere. I’d hate to have to clear this lot for any reason.”

“How far do the tunnels extend beyond this? How deep into the ridge?”

He turned to look at her, his smile fading. “There were seven levels, and the Ancient’s up to the fourth. That would put it halfway down toward the village, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It is. And the windstone at the entrance? How far does that extend?”

Nuurn frowned. “What difference does that make?”

Settak caught his breath. “Ordinary stone! I never thought—”

Rununn edged closer. “Jetta ak’Kal? Is the stone a danger? These tunnels are all containment stone. How could—”

“Not all,” Nuurn said harshly, his eyes on Jetta’s. “These were never rich workings because they were so heavily veined with lesser stone. That’s why they were abandoned when richer areas were found. We considered opening them only because the deep tunnels are becoming so difficult to work. But we always took both blackstone and windstone out of these workings together. More the latter than the former, I think. The sea folk pay well for windstone to use on their seawalls and jetties.”

“I don’t understand,” Rununn said plaintively.

Settak turned, sure of himself for once. “Where windstone is, fire can live,” he said, from the depths of First Rank teachings. “The Ancient lives in molten rock, deep in the world’s heart. Heat finds its way up in lumps of heartstone, or creeps through veins of windstone until earth tremors or the wearing of rivers or the breakage of mountains exposes the stone to air. Then fire erupts to burn unchecked unless a Dancer tames it, or earth smothers it, or water cools it.”

“But—if water is proof against the Ancient—”

Jetta turned, her voice harsher than she intended. “It’s not. A heartstone buried in the sea may burst into flame years later when some unlucky fisherman snags it in his nets. It takes a *long* time for heartstone to cool to dead rock on its own. If it touches windstone, the heat transfers, crawling through the vein, consuming the air trapped in it and then the stone itself, until it finds open air. And ignites.”

Rununn looked sick. “I didn’t know, ak’Kal,” he said humbly.

“It is our lore, not yours,” she said, consciously smoothing her tone. But it rankled that folk could be so ignorant of a danger that threatened the rest of the world hourly.

She turned to Nuurn. “I’ve seen enough. I—”

Something brushed the hair up on her arms, her neck, ran a chill feather down her spine. “Jetta?” Settak turned. Impatiently she waved him silent.

The hissing lantern drew her eye. The flame burned steadily, unaffected by drafts this deep in the tunnel. It lit Nuurn’s solemn face drawing slowly into a frown, Rununn’s puzzlement, Settak’s worry. Jetta felt like a fool. It was only this place and the talk of fire crawling, the knowledge the Ancient was here, somewhere under their feet—

The flame in the lantern soared into sudden, venomous life. Nuurn cried out in surprise and swung it away from him in a long arc of fire. Glowing droplets spattered onto the rocks. Instantly it exploded into myriad worms of yellow flame crawling over the scattered rubble of the blockage.

“RUN!” Jetta shrieked, snatching the lantern away from Nuurn with one hand, shoving Rununn with the other. It felt like pushing a mountain. He blinked down at her, his lucent eyes catching light from the fires and reflecting only bewilderment.

“Settak, take them!” Jetta yelled, and spun away to face the fire.

She was three steps into the Dance before they moved, Settak urging them in ever-less-polite tones to get out of her way. Heavy footsteps pounded away up the corridor; Settak yelped as he collided with something hard. The Delvers, their night vision aided by the fire, picked him up and fled, leaving Jetta alone facing a hundred infant flames.

Fear breathed down her spine but her feet were already moving in the Dance. Her hand thrust out, palm flat; fire died down the right side of the tunnel. The flames on the left raced together and flared up, bright, malevolent, desperate. Jetta turned on them, stumbling on the littered floor. *What is it eating?* some part of her mind wondered, shocked, for there was nothing but containment stone under those flames, only air above, and it could not live on air indefinitely. It needed fuel.... And found it, in the spatter of hot oil flung from the lantern when Nuurn swung it away from contact with his body.

Flame soared up in a semicircle between her and the mine entrance. Threads of white stone gleamed under its red eye, pointing the way up the tunnel toward freedom and the endless fodder in the forest beyond. Jetta stamped her booted foot, angry now, boiling with suppressed rage. That harnessed flame should dare act so! It defied all logic, all decency, all reason. She spun into the Dance in earnest, careless of the rocks, the uneven ground, the incipient *hysth*. She saw flame reflected dully from the stone, shining on her promise bracelet, reaching for the tail of her shirt, scrambling to combine and overpower her. Already the air felt thicker, the fire stealing what her lungs craved, mutually exclusive in need. She snatched in a breath that reeked of hot

oil and smoke and sank to a crouch, muscles tensed to launch her high above reaching flame at need. Balanced, centered, the memory of harmony still green in every nerve, she thrust both hands out toward the fire, demanding its departure.

Nothing happened.

Jetta gaped. The myriad small flames began to flow together, growing, merging in defiance of the ancient imperative that should already have banished it.

She lowered her hands, shocked to stillness. And just that quickly, heat scorched into her face. Terror knifed into her brain. In that instant she knew what had made Kori hesitate and then fail. Surprise. Surprise had killed her love more surely than the Ancient. Fire was not supposed to act like this.

She stepped back, a wobbly retreat toward the rocks with smoke and heat coiling around her, rank in her nose, flushing her skin. The fire reached for the uneven black ceiling, a solid yellow wall turning white at its heart. Jetta saw the *hysth* forming from the younger flames; if it coalesced, its first thought would be to break the seal and let the Ancient loose.

Her training resurfaced at last. She danced a new pattern with the *hysth*'s name at its heart. Rage bubbled and broke past the fear. "You will not—get—me—too!" she screamed as the shield of the Dance rose around her again, and advanced with reckless speed over the rubble, leaving dead ash where small flames had been struggling to find a foothold in the rocks.

For a breath, an eternity, a lifetime wrapped in a heartbeat, she danced with the flame itself. It crawled over her hands, twined in her fingers, dripped in liquid sparks to the inhospitable floor. It called to her, tempted her to come closer, dared her to wrap herself in living fire. Reached stealthily for the vulnerable cloth of her sleeves....

Settak's voice shouted "Jetta!" from beyond the wall of flame.

Reason returned with a rush. Jetta flung fire from her hands, beat out a spark worrying at her shirt, and clapped her hands sharply together. Beyond the fire, Settak was dancing as he had been taught, a pattern she already knew to be futile. But the *hysth* hesitated, caught between two Dancers, and in its hesitation, wrote its own death song. Jetta launched herself into a spinning leap, *through* the flames, landing lightly beside Settak. With a stamp of her foot, a clap of her hands, a last spin and derisive flick of her fingers, she banished the *hysth* into nothingness. It flickered, sank, and died to ash at her feet.

Darkness crashed down, enveloping them in sudden blindness.

A second trickled by. Two. Settak drew a ragged breath beside her. "Are you all right?" she demanded.

"Ye-yes. I—"

"That was brave. And stupid. What if it had turned on you?"

"What should I have done?" Settak turned toward her in the dark and stumbled on a protruding rock. "Ow! Left you to—ow!—burn like Kori?"

Jetta froze. Settak sucked in a sharp breath. "Jetta, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"I know what you meant. Let's not stand here arguing in the dark like fools. Thank you. It was well done."

"You said it was stupid," he sulked.

"No stupider than jumping through a *hysth*. Come on. I want to think about this. Where

are Nuurn and Rununn?”

“Here,” Nuurn’s voice said almost in her ear.

“Old Man Fire!” Jetta stumbled back and would have fallen if his huge hand had not clamped around her elbow. He steadied her without apparent effort, invisible in the absolute darkness save for the faint foxfire glow of his eyes shining an arm’s length above her head.

“Come away, Jetta ak’Kal. I will lead you. I can see well enough even in this.”

“I gladly follow.”

She clung to his arm as he started toward the entrance. Behind them she heard Rununn guiding Settak, trying to point out boulders and pits in the rock floor. Settak fell over them anyway, eliciting a series of low yelps and moans. By the time the light trickling through the entrance grew strong enough to see the ground, it had become devastatingly funny to Jetta. She snorted when Settak tripped over a last outcrop, and then started to laugh, helplessly, from the belly, as she hadn’t laughed in over a year. Nuurn stopped at the edge of the gray square of light falling through the mine entrance and turned to stare at her, his heavy face drawn into a disbelieving frown.

“Jetta ak’Kal? I see nothing funny.”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” She gasped in a whooping breath and turned to Settak, only to set off again at sight of him rubbing his hip with an aggrieved look on his face. Rununn looked crestfallen, his guidance clearly not a success. Jetta sat down on a boulder and howled.

Settak exchanged a helpless look with Nuurn and went down on his haunches beside her. “Jetta?” he asked tentatively, which only made her laugh harder. “Jetta! What is so funny? You could have died back there!”

She struggled to draw a breath to tell him how it sounded listening to him limping and complaining in the dark, but the words never came. Without warning the breath turned to a sob; her eyes filled, her lungs locked up, and she found herself weeping as madly, as uncontrollably, as she had been laughing.

“Jetta?” Dimly she heard Settak’s voice over her head, felt a hand touch her shoulder. She wrenched away and huddled into herself, her arms wrapped tight around her empty womb. She thought she had cried all the tears that were in her this last year, but that was an inexhaustible well, she discovered now, with depths she had never guessed. She had grieved for Kori, but never for the other thing the Ancient had taken from her, not for the other innocent who had died that night, a life gone before it ever had a chance to know itself. Her child. Kori’s child. A child who might have grown up merry and brave like Settak, who had probably run down that littered, dangerous corridor to her rescue and never stumbled once.

The might-have-beens fell upon her all at once and threatened to crush her under their weight.

Hands on her shoulders, shaking her, hard. Voices shouting, a jumble like a distant avalanche. Settak’s piercing yell finally penetrated.

“JETTA!”

She wiped tears from her eyes and looked up, her belly as tight and aching as her throat. She whooped in a breath and promptly started to hiccup. Her sides hurt and she could see that Nuurn thought her mad. She knew that if she looked at Rununn she’d start in again.

“What was that all about?” Settak knelt in front of her, his hands resting on her shoulders, looking equally prepared to slap or hug. Jetta avoided his eyes, sober now, and excruciatingly embarrassed.

She tried to push his hands aside and stand up; he resisted, holding her down with effortless strength. “Let me up,” she snarled. “I’m fine now.”

“Is this reaction typical after dancing the Firedance?” Nuurn looked taken aback but willing to reserve judgment on things he knew nothing about.

Jetta could not lie into the face of such tolerance. “No,” she muttered, her face heating. “No, it is not typical. I don’t know what brought that on.”

“Yes, you do,” Settak said, his voice an octave deeper than its wont. She turned her head and found his eyes, looking a shade darker blue just now, staring steadily into hers.

“That was for Kori, and for flame knows what else, but I can guess,” he said.

She looked away; he reached out and forced her head around so that she had to look at him. Nuurn and Rununn stood like rocks behind him, caught into the curious immobility of folk trapped in a private scene and wishing they were elsewhere. Settak ignored them, his eyes boring into Jetta’s.

“The Circle sent you out before you were healed, Jetta ak’Kal,” he said, with such formality that she stared. “I think that you have needed to get angry for a very long time, and couldn’t, because it is not acceptable to get angry with the dead. But you got angry down there. I saw it. What you did—that was no part of the Dance. You saved yourself because you were angry, because you got past the fear when the fire changed on you. And Kori didn’t.”

She jerked away, affronted and suddenly furious again. “Don’t drag him into this!”

“He’s already here.” Settak shoved her down again when she tried to stand, holding her against furious squirming. “He was a ghost in that tunnel, helpless and dead, and it was only the thought of ending up like him that got you mad enough to fight back. So are you a Firedancer, Jetta, or a ghost like Kori? Have you shed enough tears?”

Her breath stopped on outrage. “How *dare*—”

“It’s my life, too! I’d be dead if that had been me trapped on that side of the fire.”

Which thought burned her anger to ash. She stared into those steady, no longer childish eyes, swallowed hard, and finally nodded. “Yes. You would be. As would I, I think, if you had not surprised the *hysth*.”

“That certainly inspires confidence,” Nuurn said dryly.

Three heads jerked toward him. “But—ak’Kal,” Rununn protested. “They saved us—fought the fire, drove it deep—”

“Did they?” Nuurn asked mildly, looking down at Jetta from his great height.

She shoved off Settak’s hands and rose. He did not resist her that time, setting a hand under her elbow to steady her as she wiped the last of the tears from her face and lifted her chin.

“That *hysth* is dead,” she said. “It can’t return. The fire rose from the lantern, not from the rocks, and that is what we must fear, Nuurn ak’Kal. The flame in your lantern had no connection to the fire behind that rockfall, and yet it answered the Ancient’s call. Had there been a breath of a breeze down this shaft, we might all be dead. Settak was right. I...needed to get angry. I have spent too much of the past year weeping and not enough in healing. I’m done with weeping

now. It's time to think."

"About what?" Rununn asked, sounding afraid of the answer.

As well he might be.

"About tunnels, and veins of stone, and open flame, and how to keep the Ancient from using them all to its own advantage."

Settak's eyes widened. She nodded at him curtly and brushed past him onto the chill and windy ridge beyond the mine entrance. And stopped.

A bone-pale man in a fluttery shirt stood there among the rocks, idly spinning wind between his hands.

## Chapter 5

### Sheshan

“Father Flame!” Settak blurted behind her. “Look at that!”

Jetta *was* looking, not quite believing what she saw. The Windrider was leaning against a huge boulder with one foot propped on a lesser stone, his shoulders braced comfortably against the rock behind him. His hands hovered at chest-height, his fingers moving in an intricate weave that never quite touched the fingers of the opposite hand. Between them, a trio of leaves spun and tumbled around and through each other in no pattern that Jetta could make out, accustomed though she was to the intricate patterns of the Dance. One leaf escaped the invisible globe between his fingers; the Windrider made a darting move of his right hand and the leaf fell back among the others, swirling and spinning ever faster until the eye ached trying to follow a single pattern. A faint whuffing noise like the wind passing through needle branches caught Jetta’s ear. It stopped abruptly when the Windrider looked up and saw them.

He dropped his hands. The leaves tumbled earthward, caught an updraft soaring out of the valley, and flew away, drifting up over his head to disappear into the rocks. Or perhaps it was the wind he had caught and now released that carried them away. It took Jetta an instant to realize that he had truly been spinning wind.

“Sheshan ak’Kal,” Nuurn said, behind Jetta. “This is unexpected.”

“Wyth said you would be here, Nuurn ak’Kal, and that it would be wise to come talk to you.”

Suspicion flamed in Jetta’s brain. What business had a Windrider among closed tunnels where fire lived? Why had the lantern flared so suddenly? Fed on a draft sent by this man?

“Why?” she demanded, before Nuurn could answer. “What wisdom is to be found in Firedancer business, Windrider?”

Sheshan reared upright. “And you are—?”

“Jetta ak’Kal of the Third Rank,” she snapped. “Firedancer to Annam Vale.”

“Ah.” It came out so perfectly neutral that Jetta’s cheeks flamed. He crossed his wrists, palms out, and gave her a graceful inclination of his head, his voice as bland as his tone. “Greetings from Sheshan ak’Kal, also of the Third Rank.”

At least he did not outrank her. But Jetta’s nerves still twitched from the close call in the tunnel, and she went back on the attack. “You haven’t answered my question, ak’Kal. What wisdom does a Windrider seek here?”

Sky-colored eyes narrowed, regarding her steadily in a lengthening silence. Long bones, hair the color of spider silk, ridiculous fluttery shirt—he bore a striking resemblance to the rude

Fourth Rank at the inn save that he was younger and not so willowy, and his lean face had an openness the other man's lacked. The bone-colored skin seemed unnatural to Jetta's eyes; he looked unhealthy, but there was nothing weak about his voice. It wrapped itself around her like the glacial wind.

"*That* is Windrider business, ak'Kal. I came to speak with you, Nuurn. If I might prevail upon a moment of your time? There is no need to detain these others."

"*These others* have an interest in whatever brings you here, ak'Kal." Jetta jabbed Settak in the ribs when he made an uneasy, protesting movement beside her. "I had to dance against fire just now in the tunnel. It acted strangely. Perhaps because there was a Windrider out here?"

"Jetta ak'Kal!" Nuurn protested. "Sheshan is a guest in Annam. Such an accusation is—"

"Typical," Sheshan said flatly. "Forgive, Nuurn ak'Kal. Fire and air are a volatile mix. I have no wish to ignite a conflagration here, in front of my hosts."

Jetta's head felt ready to explode with outrage. How dare he make her out the unmannered lout? But Rununn was looking at her, Settak too, and she could feel Nuurn's eyes at her back. *Temper, Jetta*. She could almost hear Kori saying it. The memory turned her anger to water. Sadness crashed through her again, quenching the flame of battle.

"Nuurn, forgive," she said dully. "Windrider, my apology. I'm tired. Old Man Fire has been up to his tricks, and I need time to think about them."

Settak threw her a sharp look but Rununn all but sagged with relief. Sheshan only looked at her. His sapphire eyes—not childish at all, but sharply assessing—watched her without a waver or a blink. Unexpectedly he made her that graceful courtesy again: the crossed wrists, the little incline of the silver-pale head.

"Accept my forgiveness. I was unaware of your battle. Was it bad?"

"Yes," Settak said bluntly. "The flame leaped from Nuurn's lantern. Harnessed fire has never done that in my knowledge."

Pale eyebrows shot straight up. "Indeed? Is not fire the same anywhere?"

Jetta looked at him in wordless bafflement. "Your people surely have more knowledge of fire than that?" she asked, appalled. "The Windrider clans have fought beside ours—"

Sheshan gave a graceful shrug. "Can you read the message in a zephyr caressing your cheek, ak'Kal? Can you tell from the feel of it whether a wind will bring rain or drought?"

Her cheeks heated. "No. But if every hearth fire suddenly flared into a *hysth* as this lantern spawned, we would never eat cooked food again."

"Pardon, Jetta ak'Kal," Nuurn rumbled. "You spoke this word before. *Hysth*. I see that it has some significance to you, but all I saw was a wall of flame, brighter than most, but—"

"Fire is as fire is," Settak said harshly, stepping up to Jetta's shoulder to glare at Sheshan. First Rank knowledge, that, but to these people Jetta thought it would sound stranger than a trader's tale. "But know that what it *is* from moment to moment is not the same. There is the young fire, timid and yellow but dangerous, coming tentative from the rock, easily stamped out before it discovers its own power. There is red fire, sullen and spiteful, slower to die, perilous lurker in corners. There is the hot, quick fire that bursts from the heartstones—" Nuurn and Rununn both shuddered. "—and only containment stone or the Dance can halt that when it begins to advance."

“And not always then,” Jetta said quietly. “The heartstones contain the Ancient, the heartfire, and to summon the Ancient is the goal of the *hysth*, the cunning fire that calls all its lesser brethren to challenge the power in the Dance. A *hysth* can be fought if the Dancer is quick and brave and strong enough of mind to force the fire to his will, but a Dancer who allows a *hysth* to form is halfway to defeat. *Hsyths* are cunning, and they burn hot, but their purpose is not to run wild but to burrow and open a door for the Ancient, the white fire that lives in the deeps, craving the free air. I have seen it pour out as molten rock that explodes into the open, but more often it is white flame that lusts for the unlimited fuel of the wide sky and the forests and the fields. Its malice is unlimited, its hunger for destruction the reason that the Fire Clans dance, as we have danced since the Beginning of all things. The legends say we were born of fire to keep the Old Man from eating the world. But nothing in legend tells us how a spit of fire trapped in a lantern can call to the Ancient and form a *hysth*.”

“You are not improving my morning, Jetta ak’Kal,” Nuurn said dryly.

“How can the fire be alive?” Rununn whispered.

Settak gave him a quick glance. “It’s not!” he said, too quickly.

*Steady*, Jetta thought. Of all the mysteries, that unresolved question must be held close, lest these inexperienced people panic.

“I have heard that Windriders attribute malice to the great storms and curse the Hag for her callous power,” she said. “We too, find it easier to think that the Ancient is cunning and hostile than to believe such damage can be done by a mindless thing without even the capacity to hate.”

Something flickered through Sheshan’s face, agreement perhaps, or maybe a hint of those things every clan kept secret. He glanced into the tunnel. “I would swear by all the knowledge I have that nothing can creep beyond a wind-driven block. If—”

Wind gusted up out of the valley, cold and laden with rain. Drops splattered across Wind Point like needles of ice. Sheshan looked up at the gray clouds boiling overhead. Already swirling layers of mist and cloud hid the tops of the ebony peaks.

“It will be a miserable walk back to Annam, I fear. We can discuss this in the tunnel until it passes.”

“No!” Jetta snapped before she thought, and reddened when every eye turned to her. “I prefer the rain,” she mumbled.

Sheshan gave her a curious look but said nothing. Settak looked unhappy at the prospect of trudging back over the ridge in the pouring rain, but kept his place at Jetta’s side. “As you wish,” Nuurn said, and turned toward the mine entrance.

“Wait—” Jetta broke off in embarrassment when Nuurn set a hand to the huge door. Settak’s arm went around her, a warm and reassuring weight that did nothing for her embarrassment, but she could not bring herself to shrug it off. She watched, shivering in the frigid wind, as Nuurn drew the door toward him with a light pull on the ornate handle. It thudded home with a gentle thump belying its enormous weight.

“How does it lock?” Sheshan sounded remarkably like Settak in his curiosity.

Rununn grinned. Pride in his craft fairly radiated off him. “Watch! Nuurn ak’Kal is the best of all the masters at this. When he seals a place, *nothing* passes.”

“Rununn,” Nuurn reproved him mildly. His back was to them, his hands flat on the carved

stone above the handle. For a moment nothing happened, and then—

Jetta shook her head, her eye confused. Was the stone around the door moving? She couldn't tell if it was the walls or the door itself, but suddenly the small line of the crack around the door disappeared. The stone stretched seamlessly from side to side of the opening, a black bar against the paler rock of the cliff face, with only the heavy iron handle and the carved trees on its face to mark it from the native stone.

Sheshan exclaimed softly and stepped forward to run long pale fingers over the surface, digging delicately at the join. "Amazing. Even air could not pass this." Which seemed to be a compliment of the highest order, judging from the nod that accompanied it.

Jetta frowned. "If you could seal the tunnel this tightly, why bother with the rockfall?"

Nuurn turned around, looking suddenly weary. "This cannot be undone without shattering the door, Jetta ak'Kal. From this moment these mines are lost to us. They belong now to the Ancient."

Jetta stared from him to the door in numb silence. So. This too, was the price of failure. How long before other diggings were lost, depriving Annam Vale of all source of income? A crucial cog in the wheel of commerce gone, a village uprooted, others deprived of safe means to expand.... Like ripples in water, the Ancient's encroachment into this place spread outward and touched the whole world. It seemed suddenly doubtful that the Old Man's incursion here was random.

Wrapped in that chilling thought, she did not notice Settak trying to turn her up the trail toward Annam until his exasperated voice in her ear said, "Jetta! Come *on!* If you want to freeze, you can do it without me."

She blinked back to Wind Point. The rain drummed down in earnest now, slanting needles one breath removed from ice. Settak bounced impatiently beside her, his dark hair already dripping, his breath smoking in the raw air. Nuurn and Rununn were looking at her; Sheshan leaned against the sealed door, watching Settak with indulgent amusement. He didn't appear in the least bit cold.

"Go on then," she told Settak irritably. "What are you waiting for?"

"You!" Settak turned away. "Rununn, lead off. Jetta's decided to join us."

She opened her mouth in hot protest, and closed it again at sight of Sheshan laughing to himself by the door. She drew herself up and stalked up the trail after Nuurn, who seemed as impervious to the elements as Sheshan. This was probably a fine spring shower to him. The rain did not even penetrate that bush of brown hair springing over his head, but ran off it like water from a shorebird's feathers. Jetta's already lay plastered to her skull, shedding cold drops with every shiver. She regretted more than ever the cloak tucked away safe in her room at the inn.

It seemed twice as far to the top of the ridge above Annam than it had coming down to the mouth of the mine. Jetta was panting and at least halfway warm from the exertion when they topped out for the second time that day and peered over. Annam Vale had vanished into a solid sea of slate-colored clouds moving in gentle eddies at their feet. The mountains around them hid their faces in the rain; only the wind shrieking up from the bottoms, rocking Jetta in dual blasts from either side, seemed unchanged from the morning.

"Why couldn't we have drawn an assignment by the sea?" Settak shouted miserably at her

over the gusts.

“You would not like the great sea gales, Dancer,” Sheshan shouted back. “This is just a fine breeze!”

Settak gawked at him incredulously. Jetta blinked rain off her eyelashes, staring at the Windrider standing with both arms spread wide to the conflicting winds, his head thrown back and his face upturned to the lashing rain. The shifting, layered stuff of his shirt, unaffected by the wet, rippled in the wind and shed the rain in steady rivulets. *Like a bird*, Jetta realized. That impractical-looking garment seemed suddenly the most useful of any on this ridge.

She shivered in a sudden blast and wrapped both arms around her own soaked and too-thin shirt. “Come!” Nuurn called, his deep voice penetrating the winds without apparent effort. “Follow close, all of you. The trail can be treacherous in the wet.”

He led off. Rununn waited, gesturing the others after them. “I will follow, ak’Kal,” he told Jetta as she passed. “And make sure all arrive safely.”

She went on by, following Settak, too cold to argue with what seemed splendid good sense. It was only after the trail dipped steeply and started down that she realized Sheshan walked directly behind her, not in front where she could keep an eye on him.

Acute anxiety crawled up her spine. *What* had brought him up to the mine? Sent by arrogant Wyth to spy on the doings of the Firedancers? What had he really been doing outside the entrance, playing with the wind like a child scattering sparks to amuse himself? Had a Third Rank master nothing better to do with his time?

A sharp gust out of the bottom rocked her, recalling her attention with a jolt. Quite suddenly the Windrider at her back seemed the least of her problems. She could see nothing on her left hand but swirling mist; on her right only sheer walls of stone weeping rain. The trail underfoot was nothing but bare rock running with wet, dropping at an angle that forced her to place each foot with care and test for traction before trusting her weight to it. She had never been put to such effort in simple walking; her legs already ached worse than on the climb up. The veil of mist on her left did nothing to erase her memory of the long, long drop to the valley floor. She had no illusions of a soft landing.

They stopped to rest on a steeply-angled switchback. Nuurn looked up at them, his eyes lingering longest on Jetta. “Halfway, Jetta ak’Kal,” he said in rumbling encouragement. “You handle the trail like a Delver.”

It annoyed her to be singled out, but she nodded gracious acknowledgment. “You’re kind, ak’Kal. I feel more like a wet spark.”

Nuurn grinned; behind her Sheshan laughed outright. “I think it would take more than this mist to quench your fire, Jetta ak’Kal.”

Settak spun around in the trail so fast that his boot slipped on the slick rock. He staggered; both Nuurn and Jetta grabbed for him. He shook them off, glaring up at Sheshan. The depth of dislike in his face shocked Jetta to inner stillness. “I’ll thank you to keep a civil tongue toward my master, ak’Kal!”

“Settak!” Appalled, Jetta slapped his shoulder to drag his gaze away from the Windrider. He looked at her with rain running rivulets down his face and dripping from stray wisps of hair, and his eyes looked almost master-black. He opened his mouth, shut it again, and turned away

abruptly toward Nuurn.

“Shall we go, ak’Kal?” he said roughly. He took a step, forcing Nuurn to start on. Jetta blinked, staring bewildered at Settak’s back. Old Man Fire, what ailed him?

She picked her slow way down the trail, frowning from more than the misery of rain in her face. Behind her, not a word from Sheshan. For that, at least, she was grateful. He had sense enough to wait on a quarrel until they were somewhere other than over a treacherous and fatal drop. She had thought Settak did, too. What had inspired him otherwise?

The several answers to that were equally troubling. Suspicion, perhaps, sparked by her own too-hasty attack on Sheshan at Wind Point. Settak was one to loyally carry a quarrel once he had picked a side. The need to prove himself, perhaps, the journeyman in this group of masters, save for Rununn, who was too young to spark jealousy by reason of rank. Plain maleness, perhaps, which needed to rank itself regardless of talent or craft skills.

She clicked her tongue impatiently, thinking about cross-clan feuds. *Grow up, Setti*, she thought, jolted still again into the realization that he did *not* have the experience to handle so potentially dangerous a quarrel, with folk of whom they knew next to nothing, endowed with skills anathema to their own. She thought of the leaves swirling between Sheshan’s hands, trapped in a circle of wind, mentally substituted sparks for the leaves, and winced from the resulting conflagration. So effortlessly could things go to disaster, should Windrider and Firedancer arrive at cross-purposes.

She gritted her teeth, thinking of Wyth ak’Kal. *There* was a man unlikely to curb his tongue for the sake of diplomacy. Sheshan seemed more reasonable, but she remembered Rununn’s answer when she asked if they were all as bad as Wyth. Perhaps Sheshan was in the minority. Happy thought.

Without warning her boot slipped on mud washed down over the rock. Her foot shot out from under her, throwing her backward in flailing disarray. Jetta clawed for a handhold on the cliff, her heart stuttering in panic, but the trail was wider here, the rough stone just out of reach. She felt herself falling over that endless drop, and bent every muscle honed through years of Dance training in a desperate attempt to twist herself in the other direction.

Something struck her on the downhill side, unyielding yet soft, shoving her hard toward the cliff. Jetta landed sprawling in the trail on her side, the breath exploding from her lungs in a gasping snort. Her head hit the stone hard enough to jolt tears from her eyes. She caught a dizzy glimpse of Sheshan, arms raised and crossed in a curious attitude, his eyes on the clouds, not on her.

*Thanks for your concern*, she thought disjointedly, and then Settak thumped to his knees beside her, his eyes enormous in a face bleached to pale, sickly tan.

“Jetta? Are you all right? Can you stand?”

“Yes. Give me a moment.”

His hands ran down her arms and legs, checking for damage. “Are you hurt? Did you hit your head?”

“No...yes. I think.”

She put up a hand to check; he beat her to it, running gentle fingers through her hair, lifting her head from the stone with his free hand. She winced as he found a knot at the back of her

skull. His lips tightened.

“That’s it. I’m carrying you the rest of the way.”

“No, you’re not! That’s ridiculous!”

She struggled to sit up, but the clouds spun over her head in sickening fashion. She shut her eyes tight. “Just—wait,” she gasped into Settak’s anxious questions, trying to settle a stomach spinning to match the clouds.

“Ak’Kal, we cannot stay here.” Nuurn’s deep voice penetrated the jumble. “Settak a’Kam is right. Let us carry you the rest of the way. It’s not far now.”

“Then I—can make it,” she said, determined not to arrive in the village like tainted freight. She made it to her feet past Settak’s grab, grinning triumphantly into Nuurn’s surprise. The next instant a rush of nausea almost sent her over the cliff. Hands, she didn’t know whose, caught her back as she doubled over and lost whatever was left of breakfast.

“Enough arguing,” Nuurn said behind her. Huge hands swung her up into arms like small trees. She found herself cradled against a broad, leather-clad chest with Nuurn’s beard tickling her forehead. The sudden rush into the air left her dizzy again. She fought her stomach with closed eyes and willpower, deep breathing, and the Dancer’s count from long ago.

*First step right, next back, third step left, fourth even. First turn right, Fire dies. Fifth step forward, no retreat.*

“No retreat,” she mumbled aloud.

She heard Nuurn say, “What?” but lost everything in the swinging movement of the Delver’s long stride. The Dance filled her. Her blood pulsed in rhythm to the movement around her. The count filled her head, demanding, imperative, ageless. There was only the Dance....

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