

# Windrider

## Chapter 1

Sheshan ak'Kal did not remember teaching sessions being hazardous when he was a boy. Then again, he had not been the teacher.

Another ill-aimed rush of air hurtled past him. The direction that time was so unexpected that he swayed on the black boulder he was using to get above the mock battle between the two young men in the meadow below. Brown grass and pounding waterfall, tall black houses and swaying needle trees danced past his eyes, dotted with looming black rocks that promised a nasty and undignified landing. He snatched at the tail end of Myrr's half-tamed wind to blow himself back upright, knowing that he was already so far off-balance the crash was inevitable.

A great soft hand shoved at him from beneath, arresting his fall. Sheshan jammed his booted foot against a protruding bit of rock and gulped down a steadying breath, staring at his cousin Heshah sitting cross-legged in the grass below him, as quietly unobtrusive as ever.

"Good catch," Sheshan muttered.

Heshah cocked a brown eyebrow and spread his fingers, releasing his savior wind. "I've found it's hard to impress the class lying flat on your back, bleeding."

Sheshan laughed and wound Heshah's friendly breeze around one fist, savoring the eager coolness streaming around his knuckles. He flung it down the hill, watching it flatten the dying autumn grass and sad, scorched patches where the Ancient, the living fire in the deeps, had tried to crawl up veins of white windstone into the heart of Annam Vale all summer. His airy knot streaked between Myrr and Thosh, who had no notion they had just nearly killed their teacher; they were too busy trying to steal each other's winds. Neither of them saw it coming, nor when he closed his fist and yanked it back toward him. The resultant confused swirl knocked them both flat.

"Hoi!" Myrr yelled, bouncing up to glare at Thosh.

"If I have your attention?" Sheshan called.

Thosh rolled over and stood up, joining his hands respectfully at chest height as he looked up at Sheshan. "Sorry, ak'Kal. You were saying?"

Heshah snorted softly. "Quiet, you," Sheshan muttered, bedeviled by memories of standing side by side with him on the practice ground making some other master's life miserable. "Myrr, for the fourteenth time, *aim* before you release. I said throw to my right." Sheshan wagged his right hand, staring coolly at abashed Myrr. "And Thosh *a'Kam*—" Ever so lightly he emphasized the rank, bringing the bright blood leaping into the journeyman's face between its wings of frost-pale hair. "The purpose of playing the Hag is to distract Myrr, not steal all his breezes. Windriders are paid to tame the storms, not create them. Clear?"

"Yes, Ak'Kal," they chorused.

Sheshan braced himself on his rock. Quietly Heshah got up and moved farther to his left. "Coward," Sheshan said under his breath.

"Do I look foolish enough to trust an apprentice's aim?"

Without warning Thosh flung Wind at Myrr, a wild blast as uncontrolled as the stormy Hag herself. Sheshan blinked, impressed by his speed. Myrr grabbed a handful of air, ignoring

the crazy moil of Thosh's assault. Sheshan noted the fast movement of his fingers, firmly weaving his own breeze into a knot that fluttered every feathery layer of Myrr's gray shirt. *He can do it when he wants to. He may make a Rider yet.* At eighteen, gangly Myrr should have better control over Wind than he displayed most of the time. Sheshan brought his own hands up, ready to block another mistimed throw.

Below him, Heshah suddenly sat up straighter, shading his eyes to stare into the glare of the sun rising over the ridge across the valley below Annam. Sheshan's gaze lifted, caught by a swirl of dust and rapid movement. *That's a Messenger!* he realized in astonishment, staring at the fast-moving red cart bowling recklessly up the road. *If he doesn't slow down he's going to smash straight into Hylli Fargoer's lead wagon.*

An instant later Myrr's wind slamming into his chest drove departing traders and the arrival of a Messenger in a village that had likely never seen one in its entire existence straight out of his head. Sheshan went backward off the rock with Heshah's alarmed shout echoing in his ears. He twisted on the way down and somehow managed to land on grass, but still it drove all the breath from his lungs. He lay writhing on his back, dimly listening to startled voices and footsteps rushing toward him. A face penetrated the dark swarm of dots in front of his vision, blotting out the arch of autumn-blue sky overhead.

"Ak'Kal!" Myrr yelped. "Mother of storms, I'm so sorry! I missed!"

"Really?" Heshah said dryly, reaching down to pull Sheshan to his feet.

Sheshan's chest unlocked all at once. He whooped in a great gasp and staggered up, clinging to Heshah's wrist. Anxiously Myrr brushed dirt from Sheshan's ice-blue shirt. "Are you all right, ak'Kal?"

Sheshan pulled away. "Did I not say to *aim*?"

Myrr flushed from the collar of his shirt to the roots of his dark-blond hair. Thosh snickered; Sheshan turned his head. "You could have deflected it."

"Uh—" For all his lanky height and twenty-three years, he managed to look twelve again.

Sheshan straightened, grasping after the dignity that came with the rank of ak'Kal. Masters weren't supposed to admit to surprise, even lowly Third Ranks like him. "No harm done," he said truthfully to Myrr. "But if you knock me into the rocks again, you will be cleaning cart beast dung out of the meadow by hand until snowfall, do you hear?"

"I hear," Myrr mumbled, his gaze sliding toward the meadow where Hylli Fargoer's long caravan of freight wagons was unwinding from its double circle, heading for the road that plunged down out of Annam village. It had been Myrr's practice field all summer, where he had wafted dried dung over the containment wall to—supposedly!—improve his control over Wind. He knew intimately how much of a mess several hundred cart beasts left behind.

"Not to mention that if you damage him before his pledging, you'll have to explain it to Jetta ak'Kal," Thosh said slyly.

Myrr's dismay dissolved into a whoop of laughter. Sheshan gave him a bland look. "*That* I would like to see. Her tolerance for folk who get in her way being so...short."

Thosh crowed and dodged away from Myrr's swipe at his shoulder. Heshah smiled. Sheshan met his steady brown eyes. "Good catch," he said under his breath, working his sore shoulders.

Heshah grinned, a fleeting thing that transformed his thin face. "I plead distraction." He

jerked a hand toward the valley.

Sheshan remembered the Messenger and peered down the road, but the red cart had vanished. “What is a Messenger doing in Annam?”

Thosh jerked upright. “A *Messenger*? Here? Why?”

“Well, it won’t be good news, will it?” The laughter fled Myrr’s face. His dark eyes sought Sheshan’s, hunting reassurance Sheshan could not give. An uneasy shiver ran down his own nerves, for the last Messenger to appear in their lives had summoned Clan Heshth to disaster.

“Shall we go see?” Heshah asked, deferring to Sheshan even as he quietly presented the pertinent question. Sheshan nodded, wondering if it still hurt, the knowledge that Sheshan was a Third Rank master young for his badge and Heshah, six years older, would never rise above journeyman.

“*You and I* will go see,” he said, quelling the eager curiosity in Thosh’s face. “You two can stay here and prac—”

A child’s shriek slashed the morning to ribbons. “Fire! Fire down by the bridge!”

Myrr’s mouth dropped open. “It *can’t!* It can’t rise here again!” All the blood left his face in a rush, leaving him tottering in shock.

Sheshan shoved him into startled Thosh’s grasp. “It can’t crawl up the windstone anymore. Who knows how many fire-full heartstones are lurking just underground? Stay here!”

“But—” Thosh began. Sheshan waved him off and ran across the hillside toward the knot of tall Delver children staring down the hill from the top of the waterfall thundering into its frothing pool at the top of the street. Heshah matched him stride for stride. Sheshan almost ordered him back but that was unfair; neither of them had any business running toward fire. They had been doing it all summer, though, and he would rather have stubborn, quiet Heshah and his middling skills beside him than several masters of his clan that he could name.

He pounded over the bridge without a glance around for danger. *Down* in Annam meant the southern bridge and the track winding down the ridge into the valley, which would be crowded just now with Fargoer’s wagons taking out the last of the year’s containment stone mined from under the Vale. If some fiercely hot heartstone had worked its way up from the deeps and burst into flame in the midst of them....

Thinking of cart beasts running wild and wagons overturned and drover children lying broken on the steep verge, Sheshan seized a passing breeze and tucked it under his heels, using its small lift to stretch an ordinary stride to three and all but fly down the uneven black paving stones of the winding street. Instantly he left Heshah behind, who had never mastered that trick. Sheshan set aside remorse, his mind running ahead, wondering where Jetta and Settak might be, the only two people in Annam equipped by nature to deal with the unquenchable fire from below. He let the wind rushing past him fill his ears, sorting from its busy whoosh the rumble of wagon wheels and a nervous clatter of cart beast horns, underlaid by the sharp crackle of flame eating wood. *A house?* he thought in dismay. How could that have happened?

He rounded a bend and found a barrier of broad Delver backs blocking the street ahead. Hastily he let the wind go before he crashed straight into them. Instantly the snapping of flame faded, but smoke boiled up from beyond that living wall, an ugly gray blotch on the flawless sky. Sheshan, scarcely chest-high to most of the people in front of him, made no effort to force a path.

He turned left and ran down an alley into the broad meadow below, and there it was, down by the stone wagon bridge, inside the head-high black containment wall looping around the village that was supposed to keep it out. Fire, burning yellow and hot and malevolent in a column twice his height, offspring of the Ancient, Old Man Fire, the living flame at the heart of the world.

Then he saw *what* was burning. He stared in consternation. A heavy drover wagon, its boxy living quarters gaily painted blue and yellow, was locked wheel to wheel with a lightly sprung cart, bright Messenger red. Somehow fire had managed to seize on someone's careless driving and turn them both to blazing shells. Sheshan saw neither cart beasts nor drivers trapped in the flames but the fire itself was leaping through the dying grass above and below the road, hunting a foothold, a way to root itself as it had tried to do all summer, seeking to open a doorway for the Ancient itself to roar up from the deeps and eat all of Annam Vale.

Two whirling figures, one above the road, one below, faced the spreading flames. Sheshan leaped onto a black boulder in the middle of the stream frothing down toward the river, seeing Jetta trying to contain the main fire swarming up the slope. Below the road, her partner Settak, wearing only a brief leather guard around his hips, danced the graceful, intricate dance of fire. As always, Sheshan's breath came short at sight of Jetta facing the malice of the Old Man. It did not matter that she was a Firedancer, born to battle flame; his heart saw only how slight she was in the face of fire leaping higher than her head. He had never thought to love again after Fythia, but there stood Jetta, facing the natural enemy of his clan as no Windrider ever could. Though she still wore the brown woven trousers she had worn at dawn, she had shed her bright yellow shirt to face her adversary in the leather breastband that gave flame nothing to clutch. Her shining black hair was caught into a careless knot at her neck, already working loose. This fire had surprised even Jetta ak'Kal, whose affinity for flame was unmatched in her entire talented clan.

Sheshan choked down his fear for her and lifted his hands to test the wind, hunting a way to help her. It smelled of autumn grass and rock and the leaping water of the stream, and felt confused in his awareness, swirling and petulant, settling a cold knot in his stomach. Wind was capricious but seldom malicious; her violent sister, the Hag, was another matter, especially dreadful on these heights. And autumn was the start of the Hag's season.

"Sheshan!"

He turned. Ayesh ak'Kal, Fourth Rank Windrider and Sheshan's superior in rank and talent, stood above him on the stream bank in the writhing smoke, tall and lean as a column of ice, his fine, snowy hair adrift around his ears like mist on the mountaintops. He beckoned. Sheshan leaped to the far bank and ran up beside him.

"Wyth has gone to get above the fire," Ayesh told him. "He says to turn the wind southward. The other wagons are well out of range. He'll keep any updrafts off of Jetta."

Sheshan spared a look down the road. The great herd of Annam's cart beasts going down over the pass for the winter was already too far away to take fright from the commotion. The rest of Fargoer's train was moving stolidly out of danger. Hardy drovers craned back at the excitement without panic, long accustomed to life without friendly Firedancers to tame the hazards of the road. But...above the twisting smoke and flame, Jetta still danced alone.

Sheshan drew a sharp breath in dismay. There should be two in front of that ravaging wall. Below her, Settak still battled to vanquish the smaller fire, favoring his left arm, so badly

burned earlier in the summer they had feared he might never dance again. “Sweet Mother,” Sheshan whispered, his guts winding tighter. Dancers should mirror each other; he had learned that much, and though these two had—somehow—created a matchless dance even with Settak half crippled, it wasn’t working here, for the fire was creeping northward toward the village, out of Settak’s control.

Ayesh’s long fingers dug into his shoulder. “Concentrate, Rider!”

Sheshan gulped and called to Wind.

She came with eager abandon, Earth Mother’s child like her brother Fire, but ever so much more congenial. Hastily he shut certain doors in his mind, for Wind was inquisitive and not at all trustworthy enough to allow her simply to flow through him at will. He caught a strand of air and began to spin it between his hands, letting the soothing rhythms of First Rank draw his anxiety into the swirling knot building in the cradling arc of his palms. Then he stretched his awareness into the east wind gusting up from the deep valley below Annam, assessing the feel of it against his cheek, its strength as it tugged his hair into his eyes. The cool smoothness of invisible silk wound through his fingers, strands of mountain breezes swarming eagerly to his call. He took a moment to read them, absorbing the steady push from the east.

“Now,” said Ayesh.

Sheshan brought his forefingers together, pointing into the breeze as a low, wandering hum reached him from Ayesh, calling seductively to Wind. Wind resisted, answering the call of the sun pulling her upward. Sheshan stared into the wide autumn sky and focused every sense on the flow of air around his hands, imagining it winding tight into a ball growing inexorably bigger every second it failed to escape his clutch.

All at once Wind yielded; he nodded sharply and moved his pointing fingers away from Jetta and the blazing wagons. Wind followed, blowing strands of cobwebby hair into his eyes. He shook it back, listening to the sharp crackle and snap of the fire devouring the wagons.

A bit of charred canvas floated past, a forlorn blackness against the heart-catching blue. Smoke stung his nose; Ayesh coughed beside him but the wind never faltered, content now to explore a new direction, whiffing past and up toward the snowy peak hemming the south end of Annam Vale. Sheshan closed his eyes when they began to water from smoke that smelled of charred paint and scorched wood and withered grass. Not a clean scent, not like the newborn winds off the snows that had enchanted all the Windriders when first they came to Annam.

An anguished roar from the Delvers across the bridge startled him into opening his eyes. He squinted up the hill and caught a sharp breath so laden with smoke it set him coughing as Jetta, her hair completely undone and streaming behind her in a black flood, made an impossible leap over a tongue of fire reaching hungrily to draw her in. She was aiming to land beside Settak, who was advancing recklessly into a half-circle of flame racing to join hands around him.

Sheshan saw fire bursting up from the very spot her feet must touch. A hideous memory of another Dancer engulfed in flame, eaten alive by the Ancient, slammed into his mind. He thrust his arm out without thinking.

The fire flattened under a gust that blew it to confused shards in the grass. Settak whirled and shoved both hands at the flames as Jetta landed and twirled on one foot, her hair whipping perilously close to a reaching flame. Sheshan gasped, but fire fled from her into the encircling arms of the larger flames, leaving the ground around the Firedancers blackened but clear.

He tightened his fist, yanking the wind toward himself, forcing the flames onto already charred ground. “Yes!” Ayesh said beside him, the calm voice of a thousand lessons over the years. “Keep your head, Rider.”

Settak and Jetta stepped as one into a stamping leap and spin. The fire died into startled sparks that fled down the wind and faded into smeary trails of smoke.

Ayesh made a small, satisfied sound. The wind chasing its tail past Sheshan’s face swirled into a confused whirlwind around him. Hastily he lowered his hands, releasing it to soar on up the ridge behind him.

He dashed tears out of his gritty eyes and squinted through the smoke. Jetta and Settak stood untouched side by side below the road, staring rather grimly at the burnt-out wagons. Sheshan blew a soft sigh of relief.

Ayesh’s hand came to rest on his shoulder. “Did you doubt her?”

“No! But she *will* leap into the heart of flame when sensible people run screaming.”

“She’s a Firedancer. It is what they do.” Ayesh grinned and let him go. “Stop worrying about Jetta ak’Kal. If the Ancient could not vanquish her on Wind Point, a bit of rogue flame has no hope.”

Sheshan’s gaze flicked involuntarily up the ridge, but Wind Point lay hidden on the other side, below the enormous crater where living fire had forced its way up from its underground prison two months past. So, so clever, the Ancient, striking here in these black stone mountains it had never visited before in its eternal quest to free itself from its prison at the center of the world. A year ago Sheshan would have laughed at the notion, standing here atop endless reaches of the very containment stone lowlanders depended upon to keep fire out of their beds. Small wonder the Old Man had gotten such a foothold before the Delvers woke to their danger. How could they have known, these giant, moon-eyed innocents, so clever in shaping the black stone for others, never dreaming fire could crawl over their own containment wall? The Ancient had eaten an entire mine before they learned to trust the tiny Firedancer sent to protect them. *What a revelation she was—and not just to them.* Sheshan smiled, taking deep satisfaction in the sight of needle trees standing thick on the hillsides, living and green because Riders and Dancers had forged an unexpected alliance.

He looked up the hill at Wyth ak’Kal standing on a black stone outcrop, his arms folded across his lean body, his white hair gleaming like the snows above him. The livid new burn scar on his right cheek seemed to call to the dead fire, though Wyth’s alabaster face held no expression. He professed to take no interest in village affairs, but Sheshan had no doubt he had been first out the door in response to the alarm.

Wyth, like the rest of them, appreciated the clean winds of Annam.

His clear blue eyes shifted toward Sheshan. The very neutrality of his expression brought the hot blood leaping into Sheshan’s face. He turned hastily away, and found Ayesh watching him. The merriment had gone from that face so weathered from a lifetime spent facing Wind; his eyes, even deeper blue than Wyth’s from more years of mastery, were grave, assessing.

“That was a beginner’s mistake, ak’Kal,” he said, as formally as if he were still training master to Clan Heshth’s absent children. “It would have been easier if you had sung to her.”

Her. Wind. The gentle friend of Sheshan’s memories. The screaming torment of his nightmares. “I—” *Have no songs left*, he almost said. He bit it back. “—doubt it,” he muttered,

refusing the gentle query in Ayesh's face. Then, stiffly, "Forgive, ak'Kal. Jetta startled me and I—reacted. Love has little sense."

Ayesh snorted. "You have only now noticed?" He laughed into Sheshan's confusion. "Peace, Rider, we all envy you, but you'll do her no good if you cannot bury your anxieties for a better time. Fire and Wind are chancy enough together."

Sheshan started but Ayesh was watching the Firedancers hunting the source of the fire. Belatedly he realized the older master had not meant his relationship with Jetta. Had any Riders ever called Wind to aid the Dance of fire as his clan had here this summer? A fragile, risky alliance, poised forever at the edge of disaster. *Like a fool of a Windrider gusting wind at a fire.*

Movement down the hill caught his eye. He turned toward Hylli Fargoer panting up the steep track from the head of his train, over seventy wagons to pass. Sheshan did not wait for him; he started toward Jetta across a hillside turning gold and brown, its summer green spent. Smoke still curled in rank gray wisps over the destroyed wagons and up from the scorched grass. It stank of char, a sharp reek in the nostrils, a bitter taint on the tongue. Sheshan batted it aside and slid his arms around Jetta's slim waist, hugging her against the warm layers of his shirt.

"You are all right, my heart?"

Jetta sighed and leaned against him, as once she would never have allowed herself to do. Certainly never with the whole village watching. "Yes. Thank you for diverting the wind." Her hair spilled around them both, cascading to her hips in a blue-black torrent reeking of smoke. Sweat glistened on her golden skin, which bore traces of smoke stain that always surprised him. Dancers in the thrall of the Firedance were impervious to the raw clutch of smoke in their lungs and the ravenous kiss of flame on their skin, yet somehow smoke could lay its grimy fingers on them and leave black whorls on the gold.

He kissed the top of her head. "Was it a heartstone?"

"No," Settak said harshly, turning his head. His pleasant, angular face wore a grim, tight-jawed look that for once was not directed at Sheshan. "This fire was pure stupidity."

"What?" Sheshan leaned around to peer into Jetta's face. She too, was angry, the clean, flat planes of cheeks and brow looking harder than containment stone, her lips drawn thin.

Settak waved impatiently at the wagons still wheel-locked in destruction. "The Messenger was driving too fast and the drover refused to get over."

"But how did the fire start?"

Jetta turned, glaring toward the Delves with eyes so black it took most people aback at first glance, eyes the color of mastery over fire. "Drover! Did the Old Man touch you?"

A man in a bright blue and green shirt stepped out of the crowd of Delves in gray and green and brown, seeming frail and reedy beside their mountainous solidity. He looked pale and shaken and he would not meet Jetta's eyes. "Na," he croaked. "I heard it start and jumped for it. Had to save m'team."

Belatedly Sheshan noted six cart beasts wandering below the road, still yoked together, golden brown and thickset, their spiraling horns capped with plain brass, not the gold of many prosperous journeys. A seventh, much leaner and leggier, wandered loose below them, doubtless the Messenger's speedy beast. Their long, heat-sensing beards still quivered with their fright.

"*That* at least was well done," Jetta said acidly. "And the Messenger?"

"Wyth ak'Kal! Come quickly!"

Urrana, head of Annam's Council of Elders, appeared at the edge of the crowd, waving her hands in urgent summons. Wyth strode down the bank, headed for a prone figure surrounded by muttering Delvers. Jetta, too, started that way but Urrana stopped her with a big hand on her shoulder, her thick fingers still liberally dusted with flour.

Frowning, Jetta craned up at the innkeeper. Sheshan, too, had to look up into Urrana's broad brown face peering down at them, framed in springing hair the color of Annam's rich dirt. "What is it?" Jetta asked her.

"The Messenger was badly hurt in the wreck." Urrana peered over her shoulder at Finnua, the village healer, kneeling in a pool of green skirts beside a long, lean man in dusty red. Even his face glistened scarlet, a mask of bright blood pouring down over black hair seldom seen outside the Fire Clans. Sheshan winced.

"He said something," Urrana added. "It wasn't clear but it sounded like *Wyth*."

"He has a message for Wyth?" Sheshan blurted. "But—"

Ayesh appeared beside him. Sheshan glanced at him, and again, taken aback by the lack of sympathy in Ayesh's face. Uncertainly he looked at Wyth kneeling beside the Messenger, clan leader, recipient of all news both good and bad. Sheshan could not see his face but the tension in the set of Wyth's shoulders jolted loose a terrible memory of a different man in red summoning Clan Heshth to stop a sea gale. *We cannot survive another such message*, he thought painfully, flashing on memories of blood and insane winds and the drowned faces of his kin.

The Messenger's hand moved, trying to draw Wyth down toward him. Wyth resisted. Finnua said something; Wyth looked at her, his face in profile as frighteningly grim as Ayesh's. Beside Sheshan, Jetta shifted restlessly, a small, questioning protest.

Settak was less polite. "Listen to him, Wyth ak'Kal! Can't you see he's—" He shut up suddenly and ducked his head. But *dying* hung in the smoke-tainted air, a truth equally bitter.

"Wyth ak'Kal, you must!" Finnua's shocked voice came clearly over the sudden shuffle of feet and rumbling mutter of Delver voices. "He came all this way, and now—"

"And now a fool of a drover and his own arrogance have destroyed both message and Messenger. Neither of which are my affair." Wyth stood up, looking down at the Messenger. His voice raised all the hair on Sheshan's neck as though the Hag herself had blown down off the glaciers. "Consider your words spoken, Messenger. Be at peace."

"But—" Finnua gaped up at him and then hurriedly down at her patient when the Messenger groaned. Wyth turned away, a tall needle of a man in cloud white, barely shoulder height to the Delvers, who nevertheless crowded back out of his path, silent and staring out of lambent blue eyes the size of Sheshan's fist. Without glancing to right or left he stalked across the road and up the bank, angling for the narrow gap in the containment wall where the trail to Wind Point began at the upper ford. Wyth was often to be found atop that steep nightmare of a trail these days, brooding into the crater. Sheshan could not fathom why. He himself could barely stand to look at that place. They had both nearly died up there.

"Ayesh, surely you—" Jetta sounded as shocked as Sheshan felt.

"Wyth leads, not I," Ayesh said curtly.

Settak snapped upright, staring from Sheshan to Ayesh and then at Wyth's rigid back. "Someone sent a *Messenger*."

"An expensive indulgence, not a visitation from the Mother." With uncharacteristic



impatience Ayesh raked away an exploring finger of Wind teasing his thick web of white hair.

Sheshan looked at the intricate coil of silver and blue dangling from Ayesh's left ear, knowing without asking that it had much to do with Ayesh's lack of curiosity. Ayesh's lifemate still wore its twin in a cold grave by the sea.

Disturbed, Sheshan turned away from Settak's bewilderment, unwilling for him to see his own unease. Even through all the danger and upheaval of fire trying to eat the Vale all summer, word had flown in and out of Annam on the fragile breath of breezes held firmly in a Windrider's hands. The Fire Clans had preferred to send one of their own masters to investigate the long silence from Jetta ak'Kal rather than rely on the Messengers, who for all their incorruptibility still were bound to carry all messages, however founded in rumor, resentment, and conflicting observations.

Hylli Fargoer arrived, a dark-haired man in a purple shirt, his chest still heaving and his ruddy face shiny with sweat. "What happened?"

"Two fools refusing to yield the right of way," Jetta snapped. "But only one was fool enough to leave a lighted lantern swinging above the door."

She pointed at the remains of the drover wagon. A single tough curve of carved wood remained of the gaily painted box that had been the man's home, arching above the sagging door. A hook with a twisted bit of brass dangled from it, telltale evidence of carelessness.

The drover wrung his hands, staring at the wreckage of his livelihood. "I-I were late packing up, had t'hurry 'bit." His odd eastern slur faded to a mumble. "I just forgot."

"Fool!" Hylli Fargoer shouted. "I've told you and told you—!"

The drover threw up his hands and stepped back. "It weren't intentional!"

"Good intentions make poor results. You'll not travel with us again."

"But—"

"Go! Salvage what you can and catch your team. Perhaps someone will let you ride with them. Don't count on it."

The drover ducked his head and shambled away to pick through the hot ruins of his wagon. Sheshan would have felt sorry for him if his folly had not been so egregious. A lit lamp left swinging to shatter, spilling fire onto painted wood.... He looked at the long green stretch of forest crowning the ridge opposite. Not even the coming winter could have smothered living fire rooted in there. The Ancient bowed to nothing but the Dance—and that but sullenly of late.

A shadow fell across his face. He looked up at Urrana. "The Messenger is dead," she said sadly, "with not a word more spoken. Ayesh ak'Kal, do you know what this is about?"

Ayesh shrugged. "Whatever it is, Annam has nothing to fear in words from beyond these ramparts." His finger described a small arc, taking in the towering black mountains encircling Annam, weeping endless tears from the glaciers capping the peaks.

Urrana peered at him. "If you say, ak'Kal," she said, her voice as noncommittal as Ayesh's. She turned to Fargoer. "A hard way to end a season, Hylli."

Fargoer shrugged. "Better than starting one that way. Don't trouble yourself. I'll leave word downridge that a Messenger died up here with his message unspoken, and cart that fool of mine to Baro. I'll not leave him here to burn down Annam some cold winter night."

Urrana snorted. "Jetta ak'Kal would dance *him* to ash first. Safe journey, Hylli."

Fargoer chuckled. "The bad luck's already spent, at least." He nodded to Jetta and the

Windriders and walked away past the luckless drover without a backward glance.

“A hard man,” Settak said.

“As hard as need be,” Urrana said. “Duty shapes us all.”

Sheshan slid her a sideways glance. He had used to think the easygoing Delvers naïve, so isolated in their mountains and their mines that their ready trust had sparked all his protective instincts. He knew better now. Like Hylli, whose wagons kept a dozen villages like Annam from starving through the winter, Urrana never hesitated over the hard decisions.

A chill crept up Sheshan’s back, for she was watching Wyth, now only a distant dot starting up the steep shale scree at the bottom of the cliffs. Duty had taken everything Wyth loved twice already.

“Yes,” Ayesh murmured. “If you will excuse me, Urrana, Jetta, I’ve breathed better winds.” He wrinkled his nose into the breeze still laden with scorched grass.

“But—” Jetta clamped her lips tight with hard-learned diplomacy and gave him a stiff nod. “Thank you for your assistance. It is appreciated, as always.”

Ayesh nodded and wandered up the hill. Toward the Wind Point trail, Sheshan noted. What was up there of such interest to the two most talented Windriders in Annam?

Urrana turned away, briskly directing the gathering up of the Messenger’s body. Sheshan looked somberly at the Firedancers. “An ill thing. Messengers are expensive and never sent without need. Jetta, would the Circle send one to you?”

She raked a hand through the black hair enfolding her like a storm cloud, a quick, betraying gesture she stopped as soon as she realized it. “Not usually, but these are uncertain times. The Old Man is breaking all the rules of the Dance and we don’t know how or why. If the Ancient is threatening to rise somewhere—”

She broke off, biting her lip. For the first time in months Sheshan saw the shadow of Setham in her face, the village she had failed to protect against another sly attack by the Ancient. He slid an arm around her shoulders. “Fire is running wild everywhere. They certainly can’t expect *you* to be everywhere. There are other Dancers. You’ve done your part, and Settak needs to heal.”

Settak shifted restlessly, his hand drifting across the fading burn scars on his left arm. He did not protest as once he would have; he was no longer the inexperienced boy who had arrived in Annam at the start of summer. At not quite twenty-eight he was the same age as Jetta, five years younger than Sheshan, but he knew he would always be junior to her. Most days Sheshan thought he had even resigned himself to his partner’s peculiar attachment to a Windrider. Resignation was not the same as acceptance.

Jetta’s face held an expression Sheshan could not read. For once her dark winged brows were motionless above that level black stare. “Maybe,” she said eventually, so low he barely heard it. She turned and looked up at him, her eyes narrowed and fierce. “But there is one thing I want settled before spring or another Messenger makes it up here through the pass.”

Settak caught his breath sharply. “I—think I’ll go back on fire watch.” He nodded a stiff farewell, avoiding Sheshan’s eyes, and walked down beside the tumbling stream, stopping once to splash off the worst of the smoke grime. Watching him gingerly bathing his scarred arm, Sheshan wondered if that intrepid display was for his benefit, a deliberate taunting of the water’s glacial grip. Indifferent to heat, Firedancers shivered under the slightest breeze. Windriders, on

the other hand, seldom felt the cold.

*Ah, Jetta, how well you two dance together. And how awkwardly do we three step our delicate new pattern.*

Was it possible for a man to fall out of love? Could any man in love with Jetta ak’Kal truly turn his back and walk away? Sheshan watched Settak walk on down the hill with his floating Dancer’s step and wondered. How hard was it for a man who had loved Jetta from the cradle to watch her turn to another—for the second time?

Jetta’s hand on his arm drew his gaze away. Her head was up, her expression defiant. “I don’t care what Urrana says, or Settak. I don’t want to wait until spring for our pledging.”

Sheshan’s breath quickened. “But—you said—”

“The *Delvers* say that autumn pledgings are unlucky. A silly custom, but one I could abide by for the joy of pledging here in Annam. But not if another Messenger is likely to appear with news we can’t ignore.”

“Well, I don’t know,” he said gravely. “Urrana is the farthest thing from a chatterwit I know, and if she’s says it’s unlucky....”

Jetta gawked at him incredulously. “It’s just a saying, Shan! Delver superstition, because winters are so hard up here.”

Sheshan turned his head and kissed her palm. “Ah.”

Jetta jerked upright, which still put the top of her head below his shoulder, then belatedly realized he was teasing. “Impossible man!”

Smiling, he leaned down and snatched a kiss. “They do have a point,” he said, not quite joking. “Winter is the Hag’s season. The Old Man claims the green days, so—”

Jetta shook her head fiercely. “You are the answer to the Hag, you and your kin. Let autumn be *our* season, between the fire and the storm.”

Sheshan hesitated, looking over her head at the mute remains of the Messenger cart. Who had sent it? Why? He caught himself sniffing the wind, half expecting the lightning scent of storms or the sharp icy tang of a sudden shift toward winter—or the faint, awful reek of distant smoke summoning every Dancer to battle another unorthodox attempt by the Ancient to crawl into the open air it so craved. Nothing rode the updrafts save the sharp, clean scent of the needle trees basking in the last warmth of summer.

“Do I reek so badly?” Jetta asked dryly.

Sheshan smiled and buried his nose in the smoke stink in her hair. “Had you wallowed in cart beast dung you would still smell just fine to me.”

Jetta swung at him, a light blow to the ribs. “How I love a man of discriminating tastes. So what say you? Or have I cooled your ardor putting you off so long?”

She gave him an intense, searching look that told him the answer mattered more than she would ever admit. Sheshan hugged her close, all but staggering under a rush of love so intense he could not articulate it. He turned his back on the ruined cart and the two tiny figures toiling up the immense cliff towering above Annam and threaded long strands of Jetta’s hair between his hands like wind, cradling her fire-warm face between his palms. “Pick a day, my heart,” he murmured, fiercely quelling the memory of the Messenger’s desperation. “I dare even the Hag to spoil this joining.”