Navarr Ardelay’s body was laid to rest in a blazing pyre, as befit a sweela man who owed his allegiance to flame. Zoe stood numbly within the circle of mourners, unable to speak, as she watched her father burn away to ashes. Even as he had wasted away for this past quintile, growing thinner, more frail, uncharacteristically querulous with pain, she hadn’t really believed he would die. How could there be a world in which Navarr Ardelay did not exist?

She was so cold that not even the leaping flames could chase away her chill; the weak winter sunlight offered no warmth at all. Doman hovered close, his hand always half outstretched. Zoe wondered if he thought to catch her when she fainted or yank her back if she attempted to throw herself into the fire. Doman was the unofficial leader of this little village; he made himself responsible for the well-being of every soul in the small cluster of houses, and he had been tireless in his efforts to ease Navarr’s passage out of this life. He had even sent to Chialto for surprisingly effective medicines that would soothe pain and keep the mind clear. Navarr had been awake and lucid as late as two days ago, continuing to dictate to Zoe how he wanted her to distribute his few items of any worth.

“Doman must have anything he wants from the house, of course,” her father had said late that night. “He will probably choose my desk or fountain.”

That had caused Zoe to look up in surprise. “But—I want to keep both of those.”

He had lain back against the pillows, his face thin and drawn, his body weak, but his mind, as always, working working working. “It will be too much trouble to transport them.”

She was even more surprised. “I’m not going anywhere.”

His eyes were closed. “Of course you are. It is time you remembered that you are part of your mother’s family as well.”

She had not bothered to answer that, because, as soon as he spoke the words, he was asleep again.

And because she was too astonished.

He spoke of her mother rarely, and her mother’s family not at all. He blamed the powerful Lalindar clan for his fall from grace ten years ago, for the long years of exile and poverty. Zoe didn’t even know if her grandmother was still alive, and which of her aunts or uncles or cousins would have inherited Christara Lalindar’s title and property if the old woman was dead. Not that she cared. She would not be seeking any of them out, even if the unthinkable happened. Even if her father died. She doubted if any of them remembered her more clearly than she remembered them—or thought of her more often.
The village was her home now, and this house the place where she belonged. She already knew, as her father lay there so quietly, that the tiny house would seem enormous once his spirit had flown it. She did not know how she could possibly fill its entire vast emptiness with her own limp and tired soul.

Zoe would have thought her father’s body would sustain any flame for a quintile at least—his swift, questing, inexhaustible mind should have been fuel for a nineday all by itself—but in fact the fire began to die down sooner than she would have thought possible. Most of the villagers had lingered for fifteen minutes, and then drifted away, although three women who had at various times been in love with Navarr still stood weeping around the pyre. Zoe herself was prepared to stand here watching until her legs buckled under her, and then she planned to kneel before the fading embers until the world itself ended.

But Doman would have none of that. He put his hand on her shoulder, avuncular, insistent. “Come inside now,” he said, nudging her away from the circle of stones, back toward the stand of houses. “The fire is almost out. It is time to go in.”

“Not yet,” she said, planting her feet.

He turned his free hand palm up. “It has started to rain,” he said. So far, the drops were thin and misty, hardly an inconvenience, but the pale sunlight had been blocked out by a slowly building mass of heavy gray clouds, and the air felt like it was gathering itself for a tantrum. “Your father would not want you to be drenched in the tears of the world for his sake.”

And since this was true, she allowed him to turn her away from the pyre and lead her to her small, sad, utterly abandoned house.

Together they stepped into the kierten, the tiny room set just inside the door. In great houses, Zoe knew, a kierten might be enormous—a huge, echoing chamber big enough to accommodate fifty people. A kierten was always completely empty; it was a homeowner’s way of saying he was so wealthy he could afford to waste space. Poor villagers could not make such a boast, of course, but none of them were so destitute that they did not have a kierten at their front doors.

Doman stepped into the main room right behind Zoe, and she glanced swiftly around to see the place through his eyes. She hadn’t had much time to clean up the detritus of death, so the room was predictably messy. Bed linens were balled up on the floor, clothes and dishes were scattered across various surfaces, and books and papers were stacked in haphazard piles wherever she had tried to get them out of the way. A faint odor of rotting food drifted in from the only other room in the house—the small narrow kitchen that doubled as Zoe’s bedroom. She hadn’t had time to take her trash to the composting field for at least four days. Perhaps longer.

“Would you like me to send Miela over to help you?” Doman asked. “You know she is a reasonably organized woman.”

It was a small joke, but Zoe found herself incapable of smiling. Doman’s wife was magnificently capable. She had raised ten children and served as a great maternal presence to everyone in the village, even Zoe’s father, who was the last man in the world who needed mothering.

“Thank you, no,” Zoe said, speaking with an effort. “If I have something to occupy my hands, perhaps my heart won’t hurt quite so much.”
“You must come and spend the night with us, of course,” he said.
Zoe shook her head. “No. Thank you, but no.”
“Then Miela will come here to sleep.”
She shook her head again, but it was reflex. She knew if Doman decided she should not be alone tonight, one way or the other, she would not be alone. Doman was allhunti, all wood, stubborn and immovable. It did not matter how much you leaned against Doman, how many burdens you piled on him; he would not change and he would not break.
The rain had started to fall with a bleak and heavy steadiness; it was the kind of rain that could go on for days. Even less light spilled in through the small, high windows of frosted glass, so Zoe stepped over a pile of soiled clothing to light a lamp. Instantly the clutter of the room was even more visible.
She made an indeterminate gesture to indicate the whole room. “My father wanted you to pick something to remember him by,” she said. “Anything in the entire house.”
It was a common enough tradition, a way for the living to remember the dead.
Doman must have realized that he had been given the supreme honor of being the first to choose among Navarr’s possessions, for he nodded once, suitably solemn. He was a tall man, thin and sinewy, with brown-bark skin and thick gray hair, and the colorful overrobe he had worn to the funeral made him look like some kind of oracle.
“I am happy to bring a piece of Navarr Ardelay into my own home,” Doman said.
“But I wouldn’t want to take anything that you held especially dear.”
“The things I want to keep I have already moved into my room,” she said. “Take what you like.”
Doman glanced at the carved desk—a huge, ungainly piece of furniture, bought five years ago from a peddler selling a strange assortment of quality merchandise from the back of his wagon. Next he studied the bronze fountain, a miniature replica of the one that played inkiertenof the royal palace. But then he stepped toward the back wall and pointed at the three pieces hanging over the rumpled bed.
“I would take the random blessings, if you could stand the loss,” he said.
For the first time in four days, Zoe almost smiled. “Doman,” she said. “Your trait is wood. And you covet the blessings of a man of fire?”
He indicated the first item hanging on the wall. It was a square of hammered copper, perhaps five inches by five, with the symbol for courage embossed in it from behind. He had no trouble summoning a smile. “That is a blessing that should fall on a hunti man,” he said.
“True enough,” she said.
“And endurance is a blessing for a torz woman, and Miela is certainly that,” Doman added.
The symbol for endurance was the most beautiful of the three blessings, embroidered in shades of blue on a crisp white background and contained in a frame of carved wood. “Yes, I know Miela has always liked that piece,” Zoe said.
Doman gestured at the third blessing, a stylized symbol vividly painted onto a long narrow bolt of stretched canvas. “And who could not use triumph in his life?” he asked. “I shall be the envy of everyone in the village.”
Triumph was the rarest of the extraordinary blessings—everyone knew that—and
Navarr had always considered it exquisitely ironic that it had been one of the gifts bestowed upon him at birth. Or perhaps the irony had only become clear to him during those last ten years of his life. Certainly, when he was younger, when he lived in Chialto and had the ear of King Vernon, he had been considered one of the most successful men of his generation. Maybe different blessings exerted their power at different points in a person’s life, Zoe thought. Triumph had governed Navarr’s existence for twenty or thirty years, but it had given way to endurance at the end. Zoe supposed that there had been times during his political career that her father had displayed great courage; thus, in their way, as they always did, the three blessings had proved themselves to be true.

“I will be happy to think his blessings are now blessing you,” Zoe said formally.

Doman turned to give her a sober inspection. “Although perhaps I should leave them behind to nurture you instead,” he replied.

Zoe shook her head. “I will draw strength from my own blessings,” she said, extending her left hand and giving a slight shake to the silver bracelet that held three charms.

“Beauty, love, and power,” Doman said, for of course he had seen the blessings dangling from her wrist any time these past ten years. “At least one has been true your whole life. Love and power will surely come.”

“Surely,” Zoe echoed, though she had never believed it. In fact, she knew the first blessing wasn’t true, either. She was tall, thin, and serious, with straight black hair, fierce black eyes, and faintly olive skin that quickly tanned dark in the early days of summer. If she had had to pick an elay trait that described her, she thought she would have claimed honor instead. But of course, no one had any say in their own random blessings.

“When shall I send Miela to come help you?” Doman asked.

Zoe glanced around the room, at the piles of clothes and papers and general disarray. For a moment she could not imagine how the whole mess could be reorganized into something tidy and respectable and bearable. She could not imagine how to restructure this house into a place she could live in without her father.

“I don’t know,” she said, suddenly too weary to stand. “Later. An hour or two from now. I have to lie down. I have to sleep. Maybe it will all make sense when I wake up.”

Doman crossed to her side and kissed her very gently on her forehead. “Perhaps not today when you wake up,” he said. “And perhaps not tomorrow. But soon enough you will heal. It is the way of the world.”

As soon as Doman was gone, Zoe curled up on her mat in the kitchen, but despite her exhaustion, she lay awake for a long time. Idly, she played with the charms on her bracelet, fingering them one by one. She had always thought there could hardly have been three blessings that suited her less, but she cherished them anyway. Mostly because she loved the tale of how her father had sought them out, inebriated with happiness.

He had been so excited at her birth—so the story went—that he could barely wait for her to be five hours old before he rushed out into the crowded streets of Chialto, looking for likely strangers to bestow blessings on his newborn daughter. She had come squalling into the world shortly after midnight, so it was scarcely dawn when the clock struck that fifth hour, and the only people patrolling the street at that time were late drunks, early servants, and women who sold their favors. He had excitedly begged a
token from someone in each category.

The cheerful, dizzy man who had just stepped out of a tavern fished in his pocket and pulled out a cheap blessing coin stamped with beauty. “It’s the only kind I carry,” he confided with a smile. “Every girl deserves to be beautiful.”

The servant, a rushed and unsmiling woman of exceeding plainness, had dutifully stopped and dug through her bag and come up with a bent and dingy coin that held the glyph for love. “We can go to a temple if that’s not one you like,” she’d said, but Navarr had been delighted to think that his tiny little girl would receive so great a gift.

It was the prostitute, weary and young, who had fulfilled her role in the traditional way, accompanying Navarr to the nearest temple, where he paid the tithe for both of them to enter. They didn’t waste time sitting in one of the five pews, inhaling the incense-heavy air and meditating themselves back into a state of balance. They just stepped up to the big, heavy barrel in the middle of the chamber and plunged their hands deep into its rich bounty of coins.

The prostitute had pulled up a token first. “One for your daughter,” she said, and dropped it into Navarr’s hand.

“Power,” he had said, when he had identified the symbol by the murky light. He’d laughed. “It seems like such a heavy blessing for such a tiny creature!”

“Maybe it will suit her better when she is my age, or yours,” she’d replied. She dipped into the barrel again, not as deeply this time, and pulled up a second token. “And one for me,” she said. Her voice was wistful when she added, “Wealth. That would be nice.”

Navarr pressed a few quint-golds into her hand. The random blessings were supposed to be freely given, and most people refused payment for the service, but this girl quickly pocketed her bounty. “Did you pull a coin for yourself?” she asked.

He nodded and showed her. “Change,” he said.

It was a coru trait. “Is your daughter born to a woman of blood, then?” she asked.

He was laughing again. “Yes, but this blessing is for me, I fear,” he said. “An infant in the house changes everything, don’t you think? I have been told that my life will never be the same.”

“I hope you come to love her,” the prostitute had said.

“I already do.”

Zoe had heard this story so often she could recite it along with her father by the time she was five years old. Her mother had never seemed quite as amused by the part where Navarr and a woman of the streets searched the city together for a temple, but that was the point of random blessings: You were not supposed to show caution or discrimination about the people you approached. You were supposed to rely on the people who had been sent to you by the unchoreographed currents of the universe. You were supposed to understand that wisdom could be imparted by anyone, no matter how unexpected, that everyone had a gift to bestow.

Zoe squirmed on her mat and turned over to try for a more comfortable position. Everyone had a gift to bestow; everyone had a lifespan to complete; the world would change whether you wished it to or not. These were among the immutable truths that she could not alter by weeping. She closed her eyes and finally managed to summon a haunted and unsatisfactory sleep.
It was still raining a couple of hours later when Zoe woke up. As a woman born to a *coru* mother, the trait of blood and water, Zoe had always liked rain. She loved its many moods—from gentle and romantic to wild and unrestrained—and she loved the fresh, newly washed scent it always left behind. As a practical matter, rain was a welcome visitor here in the village, refilling cisterns and replenishing underground aquifers. Zoe was not the only one who loved the rain.

She pushed herself to her feet and then stood there a moment, trying to decide what to do. Caring for her father had taken up almost every waking moment for the past quintile, especially during the final days of his illness. What would she do now that she did not need to make his food, coax him to eat, and clean away the messes his body produced? Who would she speak to, now that that great restless mind had shut down? What purpose could she have to go on living?

Foolish thoughts. Her father would be distressed to think she considered her own existence so dependent on his. Zoe shook her head and forced herself to look around.

The kitchen was a mess. A long room with the cooking hearth tucked into the far right corner, it was so narrow that two people could barely pass each other to work. Next to the hearth were clustered all the implements used for cooking—the baking stones, the baskets and sealed crocks of ingredients, the pans and dishes. Near the far left corner of the room, Zoe had hung a gauzy purple curtain to create her own small private space. It held little more than a sleeping mat, a trunk of clothes, and a few useless but beloved treasures.

Now the mat was a tangle of bed sheets and discarded tunics Zoe had been too busy to wash. The kitchen held piles of dirty dishes and scraps of forgotten food. The floor had not been swept clean for days.

There was no purpose to Zoe’s life, not now, but at least she could put it back into some kind of order.

So for the next two hours she began a slow, methodical repair of the small house. She made a pile of all the items that needed washing; she put fresh linens on her own bed, which would be used again, and her father’s, which would not. She brought in a bucket of rainwater and scrubbed the kitchen, cleaned the dishes, wiped the floors, and even freshened the *kierten*. She made the place habitable again, but it was hardly a home.

It was still raining at nightfall when Miela stepped in, careful not to track in mud. “I’ve cooked dinner and made up a bed for you in my daughter’s old room,” Miela said. The consummate tactician, Miela never bothered asking you to accede to her plans; she just told you what to do next. “Bring your nightclothes and come with me now.”

So Zoe stuffed a few items in a bag and obediently followed Miela out into the wet night. Only when she felt the drops on her face did she realize she had been crying all afternoon. The tears were hot on her cheeks, but the rain was cool; it did not wash away any of her grief, only gave it a different temperature against her skin.

Miela worked with Zoe for the next two days to clean out the house. Zoe felt sometimes like a spinning doll set in motion by someone else’s hand. If Miela had not been there to animate her, Zoe thought she might not have moved at all. Grief shrouded her thoughts and muffled her mind. She felt utterly blank. She could not even summon the energy to consider how long this state would last.

Miela, by contrast, was a bundle of competent bustle. A large woman, with broad
hands and a wild aureole of curly gray hair, Miela projected both calm and purpose, and they were equally soothing. At the same time, Miela kept up a steady stream of conversation that helped Zoe tether her consciousness to the physical world. Miela never asked Zoe for an opinion, she simply stated her decisions.

“You will not need all these clothes of your father’s, so we will just set aside a few pieces for you to keep, and the rest we will give away. … Once you are living here by yourself, you will want to rearrange the furniture. I will have Doman and one of my sons move the desk, and you’ll see how everything is opened up. You will move out of that corner in the kitchen. That will become a place for storage. … Perhaps we will buy you fabric and you can begin to sew. You have some skill with a needle, I think, or you would if you practiced enough.”

Implicit in Miela’s words was the notion of a future, which would require Zoe to think, to act, to support herself. Zoe couldn’t imagine it, but she didn’t have the strength to protest.

“My cousin’s neighbor’s son, he’s about your age,” Miela went on, neatly folding a pile of Navarr’s trousers. “He has a house that’s way too big for a man alone! Doman and I will invite him for dinner one night and you can see if you like him.”

Miela had tried more than once to pair Zoe with some young man to whom she had a remote connection, but Zoe had never been much interested. Despite the love charm hanging from her bracelet, Zoe had never believed marriage and a settled existence were in her future. After a lifetime of conversation with her brilliant, erratic father, she could not imagine being satisfied with a simple man’s dull observations on crops and the weather, no matter how kind-hearted he was or how ambitious. So perhaps she should consider becoming a professional seamstress, after all. She should start thinking about what activities would inform the rest of her life.

“And there’s a man in the next village, his wife died a year ago,” Miela went on. “Older than you, but you might like that. You’ve never really been a young girl, even when you first arrived here. You were wise as an old woman even when you were thirteen. So maybe a mature man would suit you better.”

Zoe didn’t answer and Miela opened her mouth to make another observation. Then she paused and turned toward the door as if listening to someone step into the kierten. At first, all Zoe heard was the endless thrumming of the rain, but then she caught the foreign noises above that familiar sound—heavy wheels, creaking wood, raised voices.

“A trader’s caravan, traveling in this kind of weather?” Miela asked. “I’d have expected them to stay safe and dry in whatever town they’d found last. Let’s go see what they have to offer.”

She started toward the door, then stopped to look around appraisingly. “If they’re looking for a place to bed down, this would not be a bad room to offer them,” she said. “You could ask for a little extra coin if you made a meal for them as well. The back of a wagon gets mighty soggy in wet weather.”

Zoe found the strength to protest. “I don’t want a lot of strangers sleeping in my house.”

“It might do you good,” Miela said. “Give you something else to think about.”

Zoe followed her through the kierten and out the front door, still protesting, but silently by now. If Miela thought Zoe should act as innkeeper for a group of itinerant
merchants, innkeeper she would surely become.

But once they stepped outside into the chilly drizzle, it was clear this was no peddler’s wagon come to seek shelter for the night.

All the inhabitants of the village had spilled out of their huts to stand in a ragged circle, staring at the vehicle that had arrived. It was the length of two ordinary wagons, made of a painted, polished wood that would not be out of place inside the king’s courtyard, and its six wheels were enormous. Windows set into the polished walls were covered with painted blue shutters, just now shut against the rain. At the front of the vehicle, where an ordinary wagon would have a bench for the driver and a hitch for a team of horses, there was only a small, enclosed chamber. Two men sat inside it, looking out through panels of glass.

There were no horses. It was impossible to imagine what had powered the conveyance down the roads.

Or perhaps not. A faint unfamiliar odor emanated from the front of the vehicle, and a thin line of white smoke drifted between the small enclosed section and the huge back portion. Zoe’s father had loved to read reports of inventions being tested in Chialto, and he had been fascinated by the self-propelled vehicles that were fueled by compressed gasses. Surely this contraption was one of those.

“Why don’t they come out and tell us why they’re here?” Miela murmured to Zoe as they all stared at the two men sitting in their enclosed bubble. The men stared back but made no move to disembark.

Zoe was watching the central panel of the larger cabin, where a door opened up and folded downward, so that its top edge rested on the ground. A shallow set of steps marched down the lowered door, and down this makeshift stairway a man slowly descended.

He was a little over medium height, with black hair cropped very tight to control a renegade curl. His face was long, thin, and pale; his eyes were a sharp and restless gray. Everything he wore was black—leather shoes, silk trousers, silk tunic, an unadorned wool overrobe that swept all the way to his ankles.

He looked like a walking manifestation of wealth and power.

He set his expensively shod foot into the mud of the road without seeming to notice, and his expressive eyes flicked from face to face. Zoe, still a pace behind Miela, instinctively drew back to conceal herself behind the other woman’s ample form. Everyone else stood utterly motionless, utterly silent.

After considering the villagers for a moment, the man headed directly toward Doman. Zoe was impressed. That quickly he had assessed his entire audience and determined who might speak for the group.

He said, “My name is Darien Serlast, and I am looking for someone I believe lives in your village.”

At the name Serlast, Zoe caught her breath. There were five great families in the country of Welce—powerful clans that for generations had amassed wealth, consolidated property, and advised royalty. Depending on the generation, depending on the king, different clusters of the Five Families had risen to greater prominence or fallen to disgrace. The Serlasts—all of them huntsi, all of them unyielding as wood and bone—had been among the favorites of the current king since before Zoe and her father had fled Chialto.
The only person a Serlast could possibly be looking for was Navarr Ardelay.
“Too late,” Zoe whispered, so quietly not even Miela could hear. “He is already
dead.” He could no longer be forgiven and reinstated, or condemned and executed. He
was safe from the king’s wrath, out of reach of the king’s remorse.
Doman nodded gravely. He did not seem at all discomposed by the elegant
visitor; he wore his usual somber dignity without unease. “Who are you looking for?”
Zoe braced herself to hear her father’s name, and so she did not immediately
recognize the name Darien Serlast actually spoke.
“Zoe Ardelay.”
Slowly, as if she moved through a medium as sticky as mud, Miela turned to stare
at Zoe. She even took a step sideways, so Zoe was no longer hidden by her body. Just as
slowly, all the other villagers shifted in her direction, their eyes wide and blank, their
faces slack. Only Doman did not bother to turn his gaze in her direction, but kept it on the
stranger’s face.
“What do you want with her?” Doman asked.
Darien Serlast’s restless gray eyes had noted where the crowd was staring, and
now he too was focused on Zoe, standing alone and frozen in the muddy road. There was
nothing at all to be read on his narrow face. “I must take her back to Chialto with me,” he
said, “so she can marry the king.”