



Windmaster Golem

The Windmaster Novels

By Helen B. Henderson

Chapter One

Tendrils of fog clutched at Brodie's ankles. The thick haze not only dampened the sound of the surf crashing against the cliff, it hid the trail along the cliff edge. Not even the light from the gibbous moon showed anything other than shadows.

For several breaths he stood and marked his location on a mental map of the trail. Switchbacks and a sharp drop-off marked the downhill slope to the village. A tug pulled the long sword from the scabbard hanging on his back. "Good thing I have TânOer with

me,” he told the night. He kept the weapon in his cottage in the main village unless being used in a lesson. “The short sword I usually carry while on the Isle of Mages is too short to be useful as a pointer.” The memory of why he had the enspelled long sword with him flickered into being. That afternoon he had shown the folly of hubris to a pair of second-season students and spent the rest of the day at the forge.

One final breath to center himself and he dragged the tip along the ground in a long arc in front of him. Step by step, he listened for the scratch of steel on dirt or the swish as the blade slid into the grass alongside the trail. Boulders filled the space from the grassy verge to the cliff’s edge, so a scrape on rock told he was no longer on the path. Every snick of steel on stone dropped him to the ground. On hands and knees he explored the area until he determined if it was a single rock or a pile of them marking a sharp turn of the path to warn the unwary to slow down.

His fingers didn’t meet more rocks, just open air.

“Too close for comfort,” he growled. Crawling to the right he found dirt. Once again he checked his mental map. “The bench is not too far ahead. Just a hundred steps.”

The slow exploration of the invisible world around him resumed.

Foot by foot, he probed and listened. The sword scraped on stone, and again when he moved it a foot higher. A screech, dampened by the fog, was quickly snatched away. Three more times he tested the rock face until the blade hit open air. Mental calculations revealed the stone was a head taller than his own considerable height. Only two people on the island were taller, the archmage and Murdo, the former mercenary who was now the head cook for both the mages and non-talented who lived on the island that was home to the school of magic and the council of wizards.

“I’m at the bench,” Brodie whispered. “Safe, at least for now.” The path grew steeper from there. It was dangerous even in daylight, now with the dew-slicked grass, near impossible to navigate blind. TânOer sheathed, he sat down with the weapon across his lap. No sooner had he stopped moving than his skin crawled from the cold. Only where his hand lay on the hilt of the sword did the chill fail to penetrate and the fingers remain warm.

The fog seemed to come alive. Icy fingers slid around his neck ... and squeezed. More hands gripped his arm and trapped the sword in its sheath.

“No,” he moaned. “Magic is controlling this fog.” Yet again, he cursed his lack of talent. *I may not be able to break the spell, but I can reach Denai. If she can’t help, she can at least contact her parents.*

She will be a good one, hope said. She used TânOer this afternoon in practice and both metal and mage should retain their sense of link.

His hands scrabbled for purchase. *I have to reach the metal.* He forced his fingers to inch down the leather grip. Cold steel greeted his questing fingers. *Denai ... help ... trapped ... fog.*

As it did with the sound of the crashing surf just a few lengths away, the fog snatched away the mental call. The ethereal noose around his neck tightened. Blackness narrowed his vision.

Fear added power to his call. His thought turned from a cast net to a silver thread tied to a dagger. A silent prayer to his ancestors to guide his aim and he threw the message towards the sleeping village below. *Denai ... help ... trapped ... fog* flew along the lifeline. This time the impression of a sleepy “Ummm,” and the flick of fingers greeted his attempt.

The fog vanished and with it the stranglehold on his neck loosened. Overhead, the twin moons shone brightly. Their light clearly showed the path in front and behind.

Evaluation of the two routes took only heartbeats. His workshop at the forge might only be a lean-to, but the archmage had laid protective spells around the entire area and the iron itself would dampen the effects of an attack. Downhill was steep and potentially full of roots that could trip and send him over the edge. Brodie’s feet flew along the trail back towards the clifftop and his forge.

* * *

Boredom added to Relliq’s dark mood. He blew on knuckles bloodied once again from scraping the edge of the bowl as he ground herbs for poultices. The bag Ysbail had left to be ready for her return was still three-quarters full. “I’m not a healer,” he snarled. “Smashing herbs into small pieces isn’t magic. It’s just woman’s work.”

But Ysbail was not only the healer of Montrat, she was also his teacher. At least for the moment, he thought. Soon the student will surpass the master. Sighing, he dropped

another clump of the dried leaves into the bowl and picked up the heavy stone grinder. The cool stone rubbed against skin not yet callused. Only three turns later, sharp pain meant another blister raised and broken.

“Enough is enough,” he hissed. Swift movements dumped the clumps of herbs back into the bag and half-filled a bowl with water. The liquid cooled the sting in his hands. A slight movement of his fingers swirled the drops of blood that oozed from his knuckles into an intricate design. The rune for fog appeared, then the one for entrapment.

Snatching his spellbook from the shelf, he quickly flipped through the pages looking for instructions on how to pair the two runes. “There must be something that will work,” he muttered. “Even if the fog only affects the mind, confuses the will, it will be a useful tool. But how to direct it?”

His search of the book revealed no answer, still, the lure of the envisioned magic called him. Careful so as not to disrupt the symbols, he cast the spell and peered deep into the bowl to watch the result.

The image of a rolling surf changed to a narrow, rock-lined path. Recognition dawned.
The Isle of Mages?

What if the archmage finds out? fear wondered.

It doesn't matter, Relliq countered. One day, and not too far away, I will be in charge. His plan settled, he threw more magic into the spell. A man appeared. Tall and wide-shouldered, he strode with confidence along at steep trail. Gray ropes snatched at his legs. The air around the figure thickened and within a heartbeat became an impenetrable haze.

Now the liquid in the bowl once again showed its true nature. As he had just moments before, Relliq searched his memory for the means to use and control the spell. A pairing came to mind. “Night be dark, light be gone, mist turn into a living fog,” he hissed.

What had been a haze thickened and pulsed in a rhythm that mirrored a heartbeat.

Relliq's lips parted. He leaned closer to the bowl. The shadowed man fell, rose to his feet, shambled a few paces, fell again, then on hands and feet crawled through the swirling mass. Movement ceased when the figure placed his back against a sheer rock face.

The liquid in the bowl shimmered, then exploded. Sparks flew around the room, landing on the table, the floor, and in Relliq's hair. Slaps put out the embers that burned his skin and clothes. Remnants of the shattered spell danced along the bowl's rim as glowing sprites. After a frenetic dance, they merged and flared into a solid flame. A shriek at the pain in his hands and Relliq threw the bowl against the wall. Fire flowed down the wall where the blood droplets touched the stone.

His hastily whispered dispersion spell touched the flames which flickered into nothingness to cast the room into darkness. A single moonbeam pierced the gloom and moved across the room to pin the doorway in a spectral glow.

Expletives not consistent with the discipline of the Way filled the small space. "Who broke my spell? The archmage is out and about on the mainland and no one else is powerful enough. Not even that woman he calls his mate. There is no one else at the Council Isle smart enough to recognize my spell, let alone destroy it."

No answer to the question appeared and reality interceded. His gaze lingered on the broken bowl. The shards no longer glowed, but a master wizard could still pull information from them. All evidence of the spell had to be destroyed. Wrapping a cloth around his hand, Relliq gathered up the pieces and set them on the hearth. Several blows with the brick used to prop open the door in summer crushed the shards into pebbles intermixed in a fine powder. Sweeps with the cloth pushed the remnants into the back of the hearth. A kick and the powder mingled with the pile of gray ash.

Another general dispersion spell and satisfied he had done all that he could to cover his tracks, Relliq lay down in bed. However sleep remained elusive. A single thought kept pulling him back to awareness. *Who broke my spell?*

* * *

Warmth on his face woke Brodie. A leonine stretch to his full height removed more of the night's chill from his skin—and his soul. Picking up his sword where it lay across the open space in the wall that led to the forge, he hung it on the hook on the wall. Other hooks held finished blades awaiting their hilts. Competing thoughts fought for control. One said to tell the archmage about the fog attack.

Another voice hissed to talk to Lady Ellspeth. She is as powerful a mage as Lord Dal.

And the archmage is not at the school, reality countered. He is out and about seeking candidates for the next recognition ceremony.

Use the signal bowl in the council chambers, the urge to contact the archmage added. Or have Denai reach out to her parents.

The light chatter of children's voices preceded their owner's appearance.

Denai will be busy with her lessons came from the part of Brodie that didn't want to reach out to Denai. Of late, she had been making special efforts to be near him. As he had done so often for the past few sevenday, Brodie wondered how to handle the fifteen-turn-old's crush.

Sooner or later, I'll have to speak to the archmage and his wife about it.

If they don't already know, fear hissed.

Denai's appearance at the trailhead ended the racing thoughts. Behind her, a half-dozen children, ranging in age from ten to fourteen, followed in single file. Her older sister, Elendl, brought up the rear of the line. Even though only older by a few heartbeats, she often emphasized the "older" aspect of the twin's relationship.

A nod to the girls and Brodie returned his attention to the blades laid out on the workbench. Several pumps from the bellow and the coals glowed a deep red. Picking up an iron blade, he examined the edge for imperfections. The recognition ceremony would soon take place and he wanted to finish the blade for Denai. Instinct told him she would answer the call and need a journeyman's blade to serve as a focus of her powers.

"And this will be hers," he muttered. "I may not have a wizard's magic, but I can make sure that the tool she uses for the rest of her life is special." Satisfied nothing more needed to be done, he selected another formed-strip of iron. Although nothing irregular could be seen, one spot bothered him and he placed the future blade into the heart of the coals. Watching the metal shift color from black to red to white when the desired malleability was achieved helped calm his mind.

Strong swings of the hammer worked the hot metal, narrowing the edge. The metal's glow changed color. Thrusting the hot metal into the oil, he snatched a rag from the workbench and sauntered over to the wall and leaned against the cool stones. Memory of other stones, those chilled by the fog, surfaced.

No one on the Isle, no one who studies the Way, would without provocation use their powers against one who had none. So who attacked me?

Chapter Two

Morning brought with it a stop to the endless rounds of wake and worry before dropping back into a restless sleep. If no one has raised an alarm by now, they won't, Relliq thought. Pleasure at his success rippled through his body. A smile twitched his lips. *Ysbail is clueless as to my true abilities.*

Besides the instructors at the Isle of Mages, there is the archmage and his lady. What if they come searching for answers? worry interjected.

The reminder of his situation as an apprentice to a healer darkened the joy. "Montrat is so far from the school of wizards that the so-called instructors won't even begin to look here," Relliq hissed to the walls.

It will make no difference, arrogance growled in answer to the contrary thought. The dispersal spell was perfect. No evidence of the fog casting remains.

One aspect remained unanswered and refused to be quieted. The one called Brodie is a mere servant, a blacksmith who works with his hands. He is a non-tal, has no magic. He didn't break the spell. Someone cleared the fog and allowed him to escape.

"But who?" bounced off the walls, unanswered. Anger at his failure raised his pulse. His magic surged out of control. Across the room, tinder laid out on the hearth for the night's fire burst into flames. Surprise at the strength of his power shocked Relliq. The fire in the hearth flickered into nothingness. Grasping control of the spell, he encouraged the glowing coals to relight.

For a candlemark he sat and pondered the dancing flames. Contrasting thoughts danced with each spark that flared up the chimney. Ysbail always preached keeping

emotions under control, he mused. The ease by which I brought fire to cold wood proves she is wrong. Anger boosted my abilities.

Now just learn how to control them, reality added.

A snatch pulled a bowl from the shelf. He had bartered a love potion for the bowl from a caravan passing through town. "Which will have an unexpected surprise attached to it," Relliq laughed. "The wielder of the potion may find achieving his desire is not the pleasure he expected."

The sound of his voice returned Relliq's focus to why he wanted the bowl. Untouched by food or drink, it was perfect for casting a spell. A splash of water to form a mirror and to consecrate the vessel and he whispered an incantation.

"Nothing happened," he snarled. There is no anger, no surge of pleasure or lust, he realized. Once again he called forth the rage that he could not control the living fog.

*"Vision near, vision far,
Show me a caster of power."*

The water in the bowl shimmered. A solid wall of stone replaced the reflection of the room around him. Relliq leaned in closer. What had appeared as the mortar between stones now revealed itself as the outline of a door. The perspective shifted to the other side of the wall and the slender figure whose arm raised as if to knock on the hidden door.

At first he thought his spell had centered on the man from the night before. "No," he hissed. "It's not the smith. The image isn't the chamber room of the wizards' council. It's not any place I've seen in my scrying stone." A ray of sunlight penetrated the gloom of what he realized had to be a narrow alley. Braids of brown hair formed a crown in which crystal pins danced.

"A woman," Relliq breathed. "Look up. I need to see your face."

As if in reply to the command, the woman looked skyward.

* * *

Cold enveloped Kia. Her hand stopped in mid-knock. Although she knew no one was in sight, she still looked over her shoulder and scanned the street. Use of the postern door was restricted to senior members of the temple. I will not betray Brantly's trust in me, she thought. Neither Brantly my brother, nor Brantly the Oracle of Givneh.

Ghostly fingers caressed her hair. The touch slid down her arm, not a lover's touch, but that of an icy wind. The feeling of a presence was so strong she put her back against the wall. What heat the stones retained from the noon-day sun did nothing to warm her skin—or soul.

No one is there, reality encouraged.

No one you can see, caution answered.

For long moments she stood watching the street. Finally, the bags of vegetables she had purchased at the market grew heavy. "This is ridiculous," she growled. "There is no one there." *This is just a case of nerves.*

A toss of her head cleared an errant strand of hair from her face. A whispered incantation to cloak herself from the prying eyes of villagers and she knocked.

The hidden door slid open to reveal the same young soldier who was on duty when she left earlier that morning. "Greetings, mistress." However, instead of the usual wave, he brushed past her and scanned the street.

He feels it too. Her unease growing stronger, Kia stepped over the threshold into the darkness of the building. Hurry up and close the door, she silently urged. Then she sent a prayer winging skyward that the sanctuary of the temple would stop whoever, or whatever, spied on her.

As the door closed, the image of a silver cord being squeezed filled her mind. With a snick, the lock bar slid into place. With the door secured, the eerie contact vanished.

I have to speak to Brantly. As the Oracle he can explain what happened.

You already know the answer, fear retorted. Someone used magic to track you.

But who? And why?

* * *

"Tell me your name," Relliq cooed. "I must know your name."

In response, a sense of determination, then a clear rejection of the command came through the silver cord connecting him to the woman in the water. The image shifted. Even at the distance, Relliq could feel her gathering magic into a protective cloak.

Despite his demand for her to stay, the water returned to its natural state. Not even a ripple noted the passing of the ethereal connection. “No,” he yelled. “I will have you.” His mind searched through the spells and incantations he knew. A quick search of the room and he realized he didn’t have the necessary materials for a spell. The image of the place of torment, the healer’s workroom, filled his mind. Containers of herbs lined the shelves and withies hung from pegs. “Ysbail’s shelves are full. She won’t miss a few things.

His feet took control and a heartbeat later he raced through the empty streets to the healer’s office. He barely slowed as he barrelled over the threshold and didn’t slow until he reached the back room. Rummaging through the wooden box in which she kept small items needed for the casting of magic, he palmed a spool of thread. A twist removed the cap from a finger-length wooden tube and he slid a needle out. “I just need one more thing.” A moment to center his thoughts and he cast his senses outward until he slipped into the Cycle of One. His hand hovered over the rolls of tubes containing maps of the known world.

*“Powers that be, work through my hand,
Show me the place so I can command.”*

Where before the shaft of light coming through the window lit a small dot on the floor, now the beam slid across the stones and up the bookcase. It lingered at one spot until a tube glowed.

“That is the map I need.” Relliq crowed. A thought darkened the joy. “I can’t leave anything that might raise Ysbail’s suspicion.” Shifting the map containers to hide the one he planned to take took several tries before he was satisfied with the result. A whispered dispersal spell cleared the lingering magic. Again and again, he repeated it until no remnant, no errant sparkle remained. Silent steps took him to the door, where after a glance at the empty street, he strode out, closing the heavy panel behind him.

Before he crossed the courtyard, legs that would normally be strong felt weak, unable to bear weight. A darkened alley between buildings beckoned and he staggered in and collapsed against a wall where the cool stones eased the burn in his muscles. Although his hand still shook where it held the rolled-up map, he was soon able to stand. Questions swirled in his head. *What caused the unexpected tiredness?*

No answer revealed itself during the cautious slide from shadow to shadow back to his quarters. Closing the door behind him, he watched the spider web of red lines appear in the doorway. Collapsing on the bed, he gazed at the spell shimmer. Its rhythmic pulse lured him to a half-sleep and eased the turmoil in his mind. Only one possibility for his exhaustion surged forward—the use of magic. The spell to locate the map and the dispersal rituals used more energy than he had expected. “I’ll have to rest before the next phase,” he muttered. Satisfaction with having achieved at least part of his plan accompanied him into sleep.

Voices in the street outside his door tugged Relliq from the lethargy of exhaustion. Evaluating the sounds and activity he determined it was nothing more than tradesmen returning home from their shops. It must be later than I thought, he mused. The ache of muscles when he stood confirmed the candlemarks that had passed since the visit to the healer’s office. After a quick meal of cold meat left over from the previous night and a slab of buttered bread, he lay back down and pulled a cover over his bare arms.

Morning came and its glow on the back of his eyelids woke Relliq. This time the stretch didn’t come with aches or tiredness. The need to check the healer’s office to see if she had returned from her out-of-town trip pulled him out of bed. He dressed against the morning’s chill and headed across the village. The smell of freshly-baked bread detoured him and he bought a sweet roll and a cup of fruit juice to break his fast. Rejuvenated, he rehearsed the next phase of the search. *Now to find that woman.*

Confirmation that the village healer had not returned added to his energy and he retraced his steps back to his quarters. Two steps over the threshold and his plans changed. He remembered one of his lessons. The incantation to locate the unknown woman required a stronger magic than he had ever used before. The more powerful the spell, the more it penetrated the surroundings. No matter how many dispersion spells

were summoned, residuals of the workings remained behind. “That is why there are sites considered special and avoided by the non-tals,” he muttered to the walls.

One by one he evaluated the sites closest to Montrat. The nearest one was over three days ride. Even the memory of his one visit to the trillion stones called forth the sense of serenity—and power.

“But the stones are too far away for what I need,” Relliq growled. No matter how much he despised the desert, there was a protected spot out amongst the dunes where the sands formed a circle and the winds never blew. Half a candlemark later he had stuffed the items needed for the ritual into a backpack, saddled a horse, and headed out past the wall that surrounded the town.

Sweat rolled down his back and soaked his shirt from the heat of the sun directly overhead before he reached the spot where the healer ritually cleansed the vessels she used. Deft movements spread out the map onto the ground and weighed it down with rocks pulled from the edge of the firepit. The thread wrapped around his little finger, he let the needle swing free over the map.

His eyes closed, he sought the quiet of the Cyrcler of One. If the woman had actually cut his spell and the failure wasn’t a result of some outside influence, he would be able to find her in the Cyrcler. The bobbin swung in wide circles. Each repetition tightened the arc, spiraling in on a specific spot.

The farther it moved towards the representation of the western edge of the desert, the more Relliq tried to force the pointer to the east. *All those who study the Way, who can use power are on the Isle of Mages. Why is the pointer in the opposite direction?*

Frustration flooded his frame. Pain accompanied the shock of the ejection from the ethereal plane. All energy fled the spell. The needle hung lifeless.

Relliq cursed. “I’ve lost the link.”

A deep breath to re-center his energy and he suspended the needle over the middle of the map. “I have the way of it now. This time it will work,” he chortled.

*“Thread of silver, cord of gold,
Show me now the place foretold.”*

The back of his eyelids became his scrying surface. A steep road leading up to the plateau didn't provide the location. "I need more." In response, the view shifted to one of golden gates aglow in the setting sun.

*"Thread of silver, cord of gold,
Tell me the name of the place foretold."*

The needle hung for a few moments. A power beyond Relliq's own took control and the needle swung wildly. The string snapped taut.

"I will not lose again." He opened his eyelid a slit. The needle stood straight up. Its tip centered the mark—Givneh.

A review of what he knew of the area yielded few details. Residents of the high desert plateau had little interaction with those in the lands beyond the sands. One by one he brought forth the images from the scrying. He focused on the symbols on the golden gates, the mark of the Oracle. His followers are non-tals who donate their last copper to the religious leader, Relliq thought. Supposedly for giving to others more needy.

It is more likely, greed hissed, that the Oracle pockets three coppers for every one he gives away.

The tracker cord ended at the temple wall, reality interjected. No non-tal can do that. There must be someone there who can enter the Cyrcl of One, someone who has powers. Rumors he had heard about the temple being a site of magic refused to be denied. He cast out a searching spell to locate the mysterious woman. As it had the time before, it stopped at the temple wall.

"Those who live there may be non-tals, but the building itself must have runes of protection around it," Relliq growled, "I can't magically penetrate the temple so I will need to physically go there." He fought down a groan at the time and energy the trip across the desert would require. "Until then, since I have the location, maybe I can find out a name." A deep breath to center his magic and layer by layer he filled his mind with the image of the unknown woman.

"In the Cyrcl of One,

*Connected by a cord of gold,
Tell me the name of the person foretold.”*

A wind came up, tore the words from his lips and carried them away. Relliq threw more power into the spell and felt the search travel farther along the Cyrcl of One than he had ever gone. Just as he was about to give up, silver letters marched across his closed eyelids.

The cord connecting him to the Cyrcl of One exploded into fragments that flickered into nothingness. A thousand tiny cuts accompanied his return to his body forcing air from his lungs in a hoarse gasp.

Memory of a face turned skyward warmed his body and overrode the pain. *At least I now have a name. Kiansel.* It rolled off the tip of his tongue. *And she is in Givneh.*

Chapter Three

“The Oracle is back. He has returned.” The excited voices of the kitchen workers penetrated Kia’s swirling thoughts. The temple had been a place of refuge for her since the false oracle Bashim was deposed and the archmage and her father had selected her older brother, Brantly, to take over the white robe and teach the true path. As she had for the past sevenday, she fingered the amulet she wore around her neck. The circle’s metal retained the heat of her skin and the mark of the Oracle worked in the silver comforted her soul. Once again, she quashed the urge to seek out her brother. While the runes laid on the temple walls cut off the initial contact with the unknown observer, the continued watching, no she amended, call it what it is, spying, had grown stronger. And the ethereal touch? Not even crossing her arms across her chest removed the bumps raised by the

icy fingers. *I'm not even safe in my quarters. Only the back corner of the library provides a safe haven.*

"I can wait," she whispered, "Brantly will need time to get caught up since his walkabout the country." *But not too long.*

Less than a candlemark later an acolyte approached the desk where Kia sat studying an ancient tome. His brown robe blended against the background of the leather-bound books until his figure disappeared, leaving only the globe of the boy's face visible. "Mistress, the Oracle requests the honor of your presence at dinner tonight after the evening service."

Rapid calculations meant she had two candlemarks before the gathering. Just enough time to change. "Please convey my thanks and that I will be happy to join him. In the garden or his quarters?"

As if her question had taken him unaware, the youth paused. "He didn't say. Should I ask?"

"No, he will be meeting with his senior teachers and preparing for tonight's service. There is no need to disturb him. But you can check with the kitchen staff to see where the food will be taken and let me know."

"Very well, mistress." A bow and the acolyte left, leaving behind a sense of hope.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly. The youth returned to say the meal would be delivered to the gazebo in the garden before racing out to join his class for the evening lesson. Slow steps took her through corridors full of people heading towards the large room where the Oracle would lead the service. Despite the chaos of the outer halls, those adjacent to the audience chamber were pools of quiet solitude. The only noises were the soft shuffle of sandals on stone as a person here or there slipped into their assigned position in line.

A deep breath to center herself and Kia checked the small group of six students that were her personal responsibility. The evenly matched number of boys and girls stood in attentive silence. When those ahead of her moved into the hall, she followed. Her group merged into an even longer line that snaked back and forth to form neat rows until they filled the cavernous audience room and not a single person remained in the hallway.

Once in their assigned space, she signaled her group and in a synchronised motion they sank onto the cushions that served as seating. Every scone held an oil lantern. Their bright light transformed what had been black featureless walls into life-like murals. Here, one showed the bountiful harvest owed to those who worked hard. In another, pilgrims followed a white-robed Oracle up a gold path to paradise.

Her attention shifted to the front of the hall where a dozen gray-robed acolytes entered from a side door and climbed the three steps to the stage. Their bare feet softly slapped on the stone floor as they shuffled into position. Their faces danced as amorphous shapes above the lighter color of their clothing. An elder stepped forward and lifted his hands in command. On the downstroke, the group launched into a hymn hailing the virtues of service to others. A second leader in a purple robe moved to the center of the stage and read some passages extolling kindness, charity, and love. A choir of a dozen singers ranging in age from thirteen to sixty replaced him. The tenor's voice rose above the others in a tune that Kia had sung since childhood.

Her pulse beat in silent rhythm with the melody. Deeper and deeper she fell into a trance caused by the hypnotic rhythms. A shipfish diving towards the depths, she slid farther into the cottony warmth of the Circle of One until all remnants of the observer disappeared.

Gasps for air accompanied the shock of being pulled from the ethereal plane. Kia hugged herself at the memory of an alluring voice. Its words froze her soul. "Come to me, little wizardling. I am your master."

* * *

The nighttime sky greeted Kia as she stepped through a narrow door into a verdant courtyard. The delicate scent of night-blooming flowers filled the air. Only two steps from the wall, the sense of being watched grew. Not even the natural serenity of the garden relieved her unease. *My brother will know what to do.* Holding onto that thought she headed deep into the maze. At each branch, she heard her father's soft voice in her head. The multiple interpretations were a standing joke between them as she was growing up.

“But, it wasn’t until I returned home and attended Brantly’s ordination in the garden that I understood the truth of the saying. ‘You can never be lost if you follow the right way.’”

The path among the tall hedges wound back and forth onto itself until it reached an open gazebo in the center. Her older brother rose from one of the cushioned benches and beckoned. Smiling, Kia climbed the two low steps to join him. His hug chased away the earlier chill.

“Welcome back, Brantly,” she said. “Did you have a good journey?”

“Very good. The trading went well. A handful of new pilgrims will be joining us after their planting is done and will be staying until harvest time.”

After settling Kia on a bench, he moved a small table from the corner and set it in front of their seat. With a flourish, he removed the covers from a pair of steaming plates. A low stand in the corner held crystal goblets, a pitcher of water, and a stoppered bottle of wine. He gestured to the bottle and at a shake of her head filled a glass with water.

Small talk of happenings at the temple and the state of the family occupied the rest of the dinner. As a youth of ten turns bowed and took away the dishes, Kia gathered her nerve. *Now is the time to broach the subject of the watcher. Brantly will not censure.*

“Kiansel, I sense something wrong.”

The encouragement in his voice and eyes broke through the barriers she had built around herself. In terse words, she told him about the watcher. How the unseen observer now followed her everywhere except the lower room of the library where the most ancient volumes were stored. “He even breached my meditation during tonight’s service.” Her fears slipped out in a rush. “I believe he is using magic.”

“He?”

With that one word came the realization her stalker was male.

“Kia, I want you to close your eyes.” Warmth from her brother’s hands wrapped around hers helped chase away the chill from her fingers—and her soul. “Remember the touch. It won’t hurt you, won’t feel cold. Look beyond the veil to see the watcher.” His voice hardened into a command that had to be obeyed. “Describe him.”

A handsome face with dark curls falling over a forehead gave way to piercing brown eyes.

After the recitation, the look on her brother's face chased away the earlier fear that he wouldn't believe her. More frightening was that he looked worried. His hands still holding hers, she felt the gathering of magic. Not the slow building of a glacier, but the flare of a fire into life.

"Follow me, Kia. We will find this one who upsets you so." Her brother's voice guided her deeper into the Cycle of One than she had ever gone before. Down and down she followed the purple cord that was Brantly's essence. It paused at a solid wall then went through.

Her spirit hit the obstacle and bounced back. No matter how hard she tried to follow the cord into the darkness beyond, she couldn't enter the void. Frustration rose. The ethereal plane collapsed around her and she jumped back to the real world. She didn't know how much time had passed in the netherworld, but the night air now held a crispness that was not there before.

Brantly stood. Low words crossed his lips as he paced the confined space of the gazebo. Three circuits and he snatched up two crystal goblets from the side table, splashed wine into them and handed one to Kia. "I'm sorry, Kia, to put you through that."

His compassionate words startled her. *I'm the one who failed.* "Brother, I couldn't enter the blackness. Couldn't follow the cord."

His light touch on her shoulder held more sympathy and understanding than she thought possible. "You didn't fail me, nor yourself. A little more training might have helped, but I don't think it would have made a difference. I am sure now that your unseen visitor is, if not a mage, then one whose powers are emerging. I was right with you in the Cycle of One and couldn't break through the protective block he used to cloak himself."

He took a sip of wine then gestured at the untouched glass in her hand. "I'll contact the archmage to see what he and his lady say, and in the meantime we will also investigate." This time when he nodded at the glass, Kia took a sip. The sweet liquid helped clear her mind and chase away the malaise of the failed search.

Memory of the couple as they presided over Brantly's ordination surfaced. The tall Lord Dal with the dark curls. Muscular as the mercenary he once was, his frame implied not just physical strength, but a restrained power. And the archmage's lady, Ellspeth, with her long silver hair braided into a glittering crown atop her head. Although the archmage

could tuck his wife's head beneath his chin when they stood, she radiated the same level of magical ability.

"Please, Brantly, don't. I wouldn't want to interrupt their teachings."

The smile he turned on her held a reassuring warmth. "There will be no untoward interruption. The archmage and I talk frequently."

Kia felt the strength of the Oracle in her brother's gaze. Unlike the other times she had seen him in his official role, for the first time she saw him in the full splendor of this position. He seemed a pillar of lambent energy. Before she could react, he was once again the brother of her childhood.

"There is more, little sister, that upsets you than just the unseen watcher. Is it the use of magic?"

"No, I've seen you and father do too much to be afraid. Both Lord Dal and Lady Ellspeth were very kind to me."

His smile brightened and Kia's soul warmed in response until the other worry slipped out. "The last time the archmage summoned those with power to the council fire I heard him do so." She dropped her gaze to her hands. "No, it is not magic, as such that makes me uneasy." In hesitant words, she told him about the faint call that broke into her dreams the night before the spying began. "I don't think it came from my watcher. I had the impression of a living fog attacking a man, felt the plea for help but before I could respond, he was cut off." Her voice quavered. "It had to be magic, and being worked by someone stronger than me."

"So, my little sister, what bothered you about the contact?"

"I don't know if the person survived. There was the feeling they did, but I didn't feel anything in the Cyrle of One. And no one in the temple or the city knows of such a place as I described."

"Have you had any other requests for help, or other messages?"

Kia searched her memory for any dreams that might have been more. "No. If there was they've been overwhelmed by the watcher."

"I will mention the caller to Dal as well. Or maybe Lady Ellspeth. I think, Kia, that the site you mentioned is the cliff trail on the Isle of Mages. They might also be able to set your mind at ease as to who the man was and his fate."

“Now, dear, it has been a long day—and night—for both of us. I’m off to my quarters and on the morrow I will contact Dal and Ellspeth.” His hug held more brotherly love than given to most members of the temple. *But he is my brother.* She returned the embrace holding tighter when a ghostly echo called her name.

* * *

The full moon overhead cast an eerie glow on the road, illuminating some holes and hiding others. “Come on, you nag,” Relliq growled. A kick in the gelding’s flank brought the animal’s head up, but did little to increase its speed. “The faster you get to the barn, the sooner you’ll get your grain.”

At this encouragement, the animal quickened its pace.

Relliq left unsaid that the sooner they reached town and his quarters, the sooner he could see Kiansel. “This will be the night,” he vowed. Every night for the past seven days, he had gone on a spectral visit to her, but each time his magic was stopped at the temple wall. Each failed attempt only added to his vow to possess her. *With her powers combined with mine, nothing will stand in my way. Tonight is the night. Temple runes or not, with the full moon to boost my powers, I will see her.*

Alone in his quarters, he set out the bowl and carefully dribbled water in it to create a thin layer on the bottom. Research had shown that less water made for a better mirror. A deep breath and he gathered his magic. The water in the bowl shimmered and the room’s reflection vanished, replaced by long, brown curls hanging free. Pearl combs held waves of hair away from a face, but it was turned away from him.

Moonlight came through the window and framed the bowl. The feeling of power grew. “Yes,” Relliq breathed. “Now, Kiansel, you will be mine.”

* * *

Loud pounding on the door pulled Relliq from a deep sleep. Aching muscles and a stiff back proclaimed he had fallen asleep at the table. The bowl lay on its side and the water from the scrying had spilled over the table. Curses bounced off the walls. He had forgotten the penalty for the use of a powerful incantation was a toll of his energy.

I will have to be more careful, he vowed. It wouldn't do for Ysbail to learn of my true abilities before I am ready.

"Master Relliq ... master." The thump of fists pounding on wood echoed in the room and Relliq realized what had awakened him in the first place. Staggering to the door, he slid the plank out of the lockbar and opened the door to see one of the village boys standing there, his fist raised to knock again.

"Wha d'ya want." Anger added to a deep exhaustion put a sharpness in his tone.

The youth ducked as if expecting a blow. "Sorry, master. Mistress Ysbail requests you attend her in her office."

"Tell her as soon as I break my fast I'll be there."

"She said she wants you there immediately."

Relliq raised his hand and swung at the boy who backpedaled out of reach, turned, and sped away in the direction of the healer's office.

Fear urged immediate obedience.

After you clean up here, caution advised. A dispersal spell won't take long or use much magic.

Putting actions to thought, he raced around the room. The last of the cleansing spell sparkled into nothingness. A final glance around the room and he slipped out. Hurrying through the village, he ducked through back alleys and only slowed his breakneck speed when he reached the garden behind the healer's office.

A deep breath to slow his racing pulse and he knocked. At her light, "Enter," he pushed open the door. Ysbail sat at her desk, a journal open in front of her. Brown hair heralded the appearance of a woman about forty-five turns. A few wispy strands of gray peppered her curls.

I'll have to be careful, Relliq thought. Ysbail may only be a healer, but she is of the House of Cszabo, as is Ellspeth, the archmage's lady.

"Relliq, where are the herbs I asked you to prepare before I left? I have need of them. I used almost all my stock treating those stricken with fever at Gelligaer.

Thinking fast, Relliq gestured at the cabinet in the back of the room. "They aren't there?" Without giving Ysbail a chance to object, he flung open the doors and peered at the shelves. "I put the bags on the second shelf."

“Well, they aren’t there now. Are they?” Ysbail pulled a bulging bag from beneath her desk. “Apprentice Relliq, I need these herbs prepared and ready for use by morning. A caravan will be coming through late tomorrow afternoon. They sent word ahead that the healer’s supplies are low and several people are sick.”

“But, Mistress Ysbail, it takes time to get that much into appropriate form. Why can’t I have Gwers help?”

“Because you were supposed to have things ready before my return.”

The woman’s stern gaze reminded Relliq that he needed to stay on her good side. *At least for now.*

“Gwers will be washing the potion bottles.”

I can’t stay here, Relliq thought. Ysbail will find the bags of herbs I didn’t finish. An idea came to mind. “Mistress, may I take the bags to my quarters. Then I won’t be in your way.” He held his breath for a seven count as the healer remained silent.

“Very well. You may work in your quarters. Just be sure to purify the room before you start and seal the door, window, and hearth.”

Hiding his pleasure beneath lowered eyes, he grabbed the bag the healer thrust at him. Shielding his actions from his mistress, he pulled an empty one from the cabinet as well as several bowls and the tools needed to cut and crush the herbs. A glance over his shoulder to make sure Ysbail was not paying attention and he pulled out the bags of herbs he had left undone while he scried the temple—and Kiansel.

I need Ysbail in a good mood if she’s going to give me permission to visit Givneh. He smiled as he crossed the courtyard. If I can’t get these other herbs ready in time, they can be added to the compost pile in the garden.

Pleased with his plans, he headed to the village’s pub. A chilled mug and a meal will provide energy for the night’s work. After all Ysbail would not deny me food and drink.

End of Excerpt

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