

80AD
The Tekhen of Anuket
(Book 3)

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80AD

The Tekhen of Anuket

Sparks flew from the iron door handle as it crashed against the stone wall. Feng Zhudai stalked into the cell. He held a flickering candle high, glaring past its dim light, into the shadows. Baiyu looked up, eyeing his old nemesis impassively. It was difficult to keep a calm face when he burned to know why Zhudai had come. Did he want to simply gloat at his captive or was he angry because the outlanders had escaped him again?

Baiyu waited. He was good at that. Zhudai was not. Even during their childhood together, Zhudai had feverishly pushed ahead in their studies and games; ever eager to prove his superiority without taking time to truly absorb what was already before him. Magic, calligraphy, swordplay, martial arts, politics – Zhudai was a master of all but understood none. They were like clothes; costumes that he put on when needed and left off when he thought they were useless.

It was an interesting thought; one that required careful consideration. Baiyu smiled to himself. Now was as good a moment as any. In this dank prison he certainly had ample time to think and little strength to do much else.

“They have made a mistake,” Zhudai’s contemptuous comment cut through his prisoner’s contemplation.

Baiyu blinked, hoping his face didn’t betray the stab of fear he felt at those words. When he had sent across time and space to find rescuers, he’d expected to bring someone.....older and more experienced than the two teenagers his magic had drawn into this realm. They were so young; so frightened and so very unsure of themselves. Had they truly made a fatal error?

Zhudai paced forward – just two tigerish, smooth steps. His long, black hair was tied in a complicated knot on top of his head; his triumphant face harshly-shadowed by the candle. He held his black and gold silken robes off the hay-strewn stone floor with fastidious fingers. Still Baiyu refused to be drawn into talk. Let Zhudai reveal all in his eagerness to prove himself to his old rival.

“The girl has neglected to hide herself and her companions from me as she did with the Roman boy. In her haste, she has forgotten that I have seen her with my own eyes and can therefore Far-see her as well.” Zhudai barked a mirthless laugh. “And, I know where they have gone – Egypt.”

Baiyu could not stop the few muscle movements of his face that betrayed his concern – clenching of the jaw; flaring of the nostrils and eyes. Zhudai saw and laughed again.

“It will not be long now, my friend,” he said, his dark eyes half-lidded. “Your rescuers will be captured and, with your help, I will become an Immortal.”

“I will *not* help you,” Baiyu returned, his own voice low and strained.

Zhudai’s smile turned pitying. “No, you mean you will not help me *voluntarily*.” He turned away and grasped the door. Looking back over his shoulder, he shook his head. “Surely you know that I never expected you to *give* your help? I will take what I need. You will not live past the *ri shi*.”

Baiyu raised his chin, schooling his face back to calm. “Pure gold does not fear the smelter.”

Zhudai made a noise of irritation and stalked out.

Behind the closed cell door, the smile slid away from Baiyu’s face.

CHAPTER ONE

Phoenix stepped through the portal into hot, still darkness. As an afterthought he drew his sword, Blódbál, and held it ready. Peering into the gloom he listened for movement. Nothing. This unknown place was heavy with ancient, silent shadows; its air dusty and dead. As his eyes adjusted to the glimmer of light given off by the portal, Phoenix could dimly tell they were in a large, rectangular room of some sort. Regularly spaced stone columns supported a stone roof.

He edged forward with his sword out, the other hand still holding firmly onto his horse's reins. The stallion whuffled, pushing at him with its nose. Hooves clattered on a stone floor.

What was it with the darkness thing? Everywhere they went, he, Jade and their companions seemed to end up in some lightless hole – usually a prison. Didn't anyone build with windows in the year 80AD? Or were the programmers of this benighted computer game just plain nasty?

After consideration, he favoured the latter idea. The guys who wrote the game in which he and Jade were trapped, had probably quite enjoyed dreaming up the unpleasant little nuisances he'd experienced so far: giant trolls, armies of Roman soldiers, evil sorcerers and power-mad gods. So what was in store for his troupe now? They were in Egypt, so surely it would be mummies; or Sphinxes or maybe a horde of bad-tempered, stampeding camels.

"Ow!" Jade's pained outcry told him the others were right on his heels. He tugged his horse forward to make space for them. More hooves echoed. Brynn and Marcus stepped through. Marcus' bow was ready, an arrow notched. Brynn drew his new sword and glared into the gloom.

Abruptly, the faint light vanished as the gateway between Asgard and Egypt popped out of existence with a slight *schlorping* sound. Come what may, they'd arrived on Level Three.

"Everyone ok?" Phoenix called over the stompings and nickerings. One by one, the others assured him they were all ok.

"So," he aimed for cheerful, "on to the second question. Anyone know where we are?"

There was a small silence then Brynn's cocky voice piped up. "Ægyptus?"

"Thanks for that. Helpful," Phoenix said sarcastically. He heard a fleshy thump. Brynn squawked and Phoenix grinned, guessing Marcus had whacked the boy on the arm.

"Hang on," Jade said. Phoenix gripped her staff reflexively as she thrust it into his hand. Seconds later, a greenish light appeared in her cupped hands. She'd cast a light-spell. Next she murmured a few words over the glowing ball and blew on it. To Phoenix's surprise, it wafted out of her hands and began to drift around the room.

"Nice trick," he admired, handing the staff back.

Jade grinned. "Courtesy of that spell-book Ásúlfr gave me back in Sweden." She sent another off in a different direction; then a third. Soon the room was eerily lit by what looked like a dozen giant firefly-backsides.

She exclaimed in soft delight and hurried over to the nearest wall. Phoenix passed the horses' reins to Brynn and joined her, wondering what she found so fascinating. As far as he could see, it was just a wall covered in pretty pictures.

"They're hieroglyphs," she breathed, brushing the tips of her fingers over the jewel-coloured images.

Brynn and Marcus came over, peering at the wall.

"Did you tie the horses?" Phoenix asked Brynn.

“Nope. Where would they go?” The Breton boy raised an eyebrow at him.

“Good point,” Phoenix glanced around the room. There were definitely no windows and, more concerning, no doors. Even the dimension-gate entrance they had come through was now merely a three-stone door-frame set into solid wall. “Maybe we shouldn’t waste time on the walls, Jade,” he laid a hand on her shoulder. “Maybe we should be looking for a way out of here.”

“I suppose,” she didn’t turn away. Phoenix waited a second then gestured to the other two. There didn’t seem to be any immediate danger. It wouldn’t hurt to let her stay while they looked for a way out. He and Jade had had their differences in the past but Phoenix was determined to be a true leader now and earn her respect and co-operation. Ordering her to come away from the hieroglyphs would be a poor way to start.

“Could you at least lend us some of the lights?” he prodded her gently in the ribs. All of the light-balls danced around her head, illuminating the wall.

Jade nodded, tucked a stray strand of shoulder-length, white-blond hair behind a pointed ear and waved a hand absently at the hovering lights. Three of them drifted down to bob just over the boys’ heads.

“Right,” Phoenix peered into the gloomiest corners, “there has to be an exit. Let’s split up and find it – but don’t get lost. We don’t know how big this place is.” The other two nodded and walked away, green lights dancing around their heads. Phoenix headed in the opposite direction.

As it turned out, they were in no danger of getting lost. The room was fairly small and flanked by two rooms that were even smaller. Brynn found what had to be the original door but it had been built in with large, firmly-mortared limestone blocks. There was no exit.

Finally, the three gathered around a central stone altar.

“Unless there’s some sort of secret entrance, I can’t see a way out of here,” Phoenix admitted. “Ideas?”

“We could look for a secret entrance,” Brynn offered, grinning.

Phoenix raised his eyes to the ceiling but nodded. “It was a joke. Any *other* ideas?”

Marcus glanced over his shoulder. “Let’s ask Jade.”

All three turned to look at her. Their half-elven companion was still staring at the hieroglyphs that covered the walls. Her mouth moved silently and her eyes were almost crossed with intense concentration.

“I’ve got it!” She turned and beckoned them, excitement making her green eyes glitter. Relieved, Phoenix jogged over. Trust Jade to come up with a decent plan to get them out of trouble.

“So?” He prompted.

She pointed at a set of pictures encircled by an oval. To Phoenix it looked like a hook and a shovel followed by a flying saucer and a small chicken. Outside the oval was a hamburger bun, a sailing boat and something that looked like a complicated showerhead. Perplexed, he raised his eyebrows at Jade.

She grinned at him. “See? It says we’re in the offering chapel of Snefru’s Shining Pyramid. The game programmers are obviously fans of the Stargate Sci-fi TV series. Any minute now it will be aliens landing on the pyramid.”

Phoenix, Brynn and Marcus all stared at her with looks of blank astonishment for a moment before blinking again at the pictures. Phoenix decided to ignore the Stargate comment, as he’d never watched the show and had no idea what connection it had to their current problems. He examined the hieroglyphs again. He even tilted his head and closed one eye, hoping that would help. It still looked like a chicken and a complicated shower device.

"I'll take your word for it," he conceded. "Does it say how to get *out* of the chapel of Snefru's Shining pyramid by any chance?"

"What? No, it's all about what a great Pharaoh Snefru was and how he's going to get to the afterlife." She blinked at him. "Can't you read it?"

All three of the boys shook their heads.

"Huh," she pulled down her mouth. "I thought that language spell Ásúlfr cast back in Olshammar would work the same on all of us but I guess I'm the only one who can understand *and* read other languages. Weird."

"Very weird," Phoenix tried to curb his rising impatience. "But will it help us get *out* of here?" He reached out and grabbed her shoulder as she turned back to the hieroglyphs. "Jade! Focus! We're bricked up in this place and I'll bet horses use lots of oxygen. We need to get out of here!"

She looked around the room, frowning.

"Oh," he added as an afterthought, "and please tell me that bit about aliens was just a joke?"

Her expression cleared to a smile. "I'm pretty sure they wouldn't write something like that into the plot. There was no mention in the game manual, was there?"

Phoenix thought hard then shook his head, relieved. "Ultimate badguy to kill, Yu Dragon to master; plus five levels of evil henchmen, Gods, Elves, magic and monsters, yes; but no aliens, thank goodness."

"OK, so we just need to get out of here and get on our way to releasing the goddess Anuket from her prison then," Jade summed up. "And remember, we were told we have to release Anuket before the 'death of the moon'. I still don't know what that means, though."

"Then we have to start by getting out," he shrugged. They all stared around again, seeking inspiration.

"Secret passage?" she raised her brows at them.

"Already thought of it," Phoenix replied. Brynn snorted a laugh.

"But did anyone actually look for one?"

The three boys exchanged sheepish glances.

"Obviously not," Jade sighed, shaking her head. "Let's go then."

For a good ten minutes, the companions prowled around the temple, poking, pushing, twisting and prodding any likely-looking carving and stone they could find. The room got hotter and stuffier. Various bits of fur clothing from their time in Sweden and Asgard ended up on the altar, stripped as sweat began to drip. The horses' heads drooped and their breathing became laboured.

The group gathered again. Jade shoved their furs into the Hyllion Bagia and retrieved cooler clothing from within its endless, black depths. They all changed. It helped a bit but there was no ignoring the shortness of breath that was now bothering all of them. They were running out of air.

"Why is the back wall so slanty?" Brynn wiped sweat from his face.

Jade tilted her head and eyed the wall. "I guess the temple is right up against the pyramid."

"What *is* a pyramid, anyway?" Brynn seemed aggrieved he didn't know.

Phoenix stared at the boy. It was hard to remember that Brynn came from a small village in early Roman Britain. He was so smart Phoenix often forgot they came from vastly different backgrounds. How *could* a peasant boy from 80AD know about other cultures? He couldn't exactly watch a documentary.

"The people of Ægyptus call them *mer*," Marcus' quiet comment intruded on his thoughts.

“They do?” Phoenix switched his gaze to him, amazed. Normally Jade was the walking encyclopaedia. Marcus hardly said a word.

The Roman boy nodded. “Pyramid is the word the Greeks gave them. Mer are the tombs of dead kings – the *paros*, they call them.”

“Pharaohs. Hey!” Jade’s green eyes were wide. “How do you know so much?”

Phoenix sent her a narrow look, wondering if she were jealous of Marcus’ knowledge. She was pretty sensitive about being the smartest in the group.

“I came to Ægyptus with my uncle,” Marcus shrugged. “He took me on a trading mission and we stayed in Alexandria for several months. My uncle thought I found the place and the people too fascinating and sent me home again. Rome owns Egypt but we are not well-liked here and he was worried I would get myself killed wandering around the streets on my own.”

Phoenix stared at Marcus for several seconds, wondering what had prompted that long a speech. Sweat dribbled into his eyes, reminding him of their situation.

“OK.” He slapped his hands flat on the altar. “So we know the back wall is part of the pyramid – mer, I mean,” he corrected himself. “Does that help us? Would there be a secret passage there?”

Jade shook her head. “Even if there was, it would only lead deeper into the pyramid, not to the outside. I have no idea when Snefru’s Shining pyramid was built but the air in there would probably be bad if the tomb hasn’t been robbed.”

Brynn’s eyes lit up. “Robbed? As in treasure?” He sent a covetous look at the sloping back wall. “Couldn’t we just try? We’ve hardly found any treasure at all so far.”

Phoenix laughed at the little thief and laid his sword on the altar. “C’mon, a magic sword is pretty good treasure, so is a magic bag full of Roman denarii and the Horn of Aurfanon that we used to summon help against the troll in Svealand.”

The boy made a face. “I want some gold to take home with me, thanks. We can only use that horn twice more, anyway, remember?”

“Don’t forget what our true mission is,” Marcus reminded him, frowning.

Brynn waved him away. “I know, I know. We’re out to kill Feng Zhudai, the big badguy. But hey, can’t a guy dream of more than just revenge?” He blinked innocent brown eyes up at the Roman. Marcus sent him a sceptical look.

“C’mon, you lot,” Phoenix urged. “We’ve got to stay on track. We need to find a way out. Look.” He pointed at the horses. One of them had slipped to her knees and lay half on her side on the stone floor, panting.

Jade ran its side and muttered in its ear. One by one, she went to all five horses and spoke to them in low tones. One by one, the animals’ breathing calmed and their eyes closed. She came back to the altar, looking a worried and guilty.

“I should have put them to sleep earlier. It would have saved oxygen and caused them less stress.”

“It’s a good idea, whenever,” he assured her. He was rewarded with a quick, grateful look. “Back to the problem at hand. How do we get out?”

Marcus ran a hand through his short, dark hair. Brynn chewed on his bottom lip, eyes darting around the room. Jade tilted her head to one side and tapped one finger on her teeth. Her eyes widened. Phoenix looked at her, waiting.

“If you were at home, Phoenix,” she mused, “how would you deal with this?”

It took him a second to understand what she meant then enlightenment hit and he smiled. Of course! If he were back in his bedroom in the real world, he’d be playing this as a computer game. It would be a simple matter to.....

“I’d shoot my way out!” He exclaimed. “Blow up the entrance.”

“What with?” Marcus frowned, iron-gloved hands spread. “We have only my bow, and my arrows won’t penetrate rock.”

“Oh,” Phoenix sagged. Another idea bloomed. Iron gloves! He pointed at Marcus’ belt. “Thor’s hammer! That’s it. You can use Mjölir to smash the blocked up doorway and get us out. Go on! Do it now!” Stepping around the altar, he gripped Marcus’s arm and shook it.

Brynn caught his excitement and grinned. Jade frowned, glancing back and forth between Marcus, the wall and the horses. Marcus looked at each of them then down at the god’s hammer that hung from his belt, doubt flickering across his handsome face. Thor had lent it to them in order to free the goddess Anuket – their task in this place. It was a thing of such enormous weight and power that the god had also given him the magic belt and gloves needed to wield it.

The Roman eyed the large, heavy limestone blocks surrounding them. “I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.”

Phoenix thumped his friend on the back and gave him a shove in the direction of the ancient doorway. “It’s the only one we’ve got. C’mon. Let’s get the horses awake and ready to go. Get us out of here, Marcus.”

Clearly reluctant, Marcus unhooked the hammer from his belt. Jade woke the horses and, together with Brynn, urged them closer to the bricked up door. Phoenix fell behind Marcus, not wanting to get in his way. He nodded as the Roman sent him one last questioning look. Rotating his head and shoulders, Marcus swung the hammer once in a small circle. It left a strange after-image etched as a purple-blue arc in the air. A distant rumble of thunder sounded, even through the thick stone walls. Marcus glanced once more at the stone ceiling.

“Go on!” Phoenix urged, impatient to get out and on with it.

With a swift underarm motion, Marcus hurled the iron hammer at the blocked entranceway. It flew through the thick air with the zipping crackle of electricity. Purple-blue lights arced from its iron head to earth in the stone around the door. A deafening *crack* and blinding flash of brilliant white light filled every corner of the room. Jade yelped but her voice was drowned in the violence of the noise. The horses reared and whinnied in fright. Brynn, clinging to two sets of reins, was tossed about like a ragdoll. The stone door blew outward in an explosion of rock and dust. Sunlight streamed in and the hammer flew back into Marcus’ waiting hand like a boomerang.

There was a brief shocking silence, followed by the ominous snap of breaking stone.

Phoenix and Jade looked at each other then up at the ceiling.

“Uh oh,” Brynn said quietly.

CHAPTER TWO

“Go! Go! Go!” Jade tugged at her horses’ reins and jerked the beast forward. Ahead, Marcus did the same. The cracking, creaking sounds grew louder. Marcus, with the aid of Mjöltnir, began smashing large chunks of stone out of the way like he was playing golf. Blocks of limestone sailed through the air, clearing a path for the skittish horses.

Before long, all five horses and four companions were clear of the ancient chapel. Breathing hard and coughing dust, the travellers turned to look back. Towering a hundred metres above the chapel was the massive Shining Pyramid of Snefru. With gleaming white limestone covering its sloping sides and a tip that reached up into the clear blue heavens, it was a truly awe-inspiring sight. They had little time to admire its beauty, however. With a thunderous *crack*, one of the two outlying buildings beside the chapel collapsed in a heap of tumbled stone and flying dust.

Phoenix gasped and clapped a hand to his side. “Blódbál! I left it on the altar!” He spun around and sprinted back into the dark temple.

“No!” Jade yelled. “Phoenix, come back! It’s going to collapse any sec.....”

Before she completed the sentence, the two and a half thousand year old offering chapel of Snefru’s Shining Pyramid folded in on itself with little more than a rumble and a whoosh of dusty air. Tonnes of stone fell, leaving nothing but a pile of masonry where Phoenix had vanished.

For several seconds, Jade, Marcus and Brynn stared in shock at the ruin. Then Jade tossed aside her staff and ran forward.

“Phoenix! Phoenix!” Feverishly, she hauled at the smaller blocks, tossing them aside with her half-elven strength. Brynn and Marcus joined her; Brynn struggling with rocks too big for his wiry, ten-year old frame; Marcus using the hammer to knock aside what chunks he could safely move that way. Minutes dragged by and still they hadn’t found him.

“Can’t you just pick the blocks up?” she demanded. “Don’t the gloves make you strong?”

Marcus shook his head. “They’re linked to the hammer. They don’t give me extra strength for anything else. I’m sorry.”

Jade pursed her lips to stop herself from snapping at him. It wasn’t his fault. There had to be a better way to get Phoenix out. Who knew how many lives he’d lose if he were stuck under a big stone for too long. It had already been at least ten minutes.

There was a noise; a soft cry for help; audible only to her half-elven hearing.

“Stop! Listen.” Holding up a hand, she put a finger to her lips. The others paused, looking at her. “There!” She pointed to a spot about six feet from where Marcus stood. Hurrying over, she lay down on her stomach and peered into a dark gap.

“Phoenix?” Using a hand-sized rock, she tapped out the Morse code for SOS on a limestone block. Dot dot dot dash dash dash dot dot dot. She repeated it then waited. Faintly, the sequence came back at them from below. Dot dot dot dash dash dash dot dot dot.

With a relieved smile, she tossed aside the stone and beckoned to Marcus.

“He’s down here,” she pointed. “If you can knock the top few blocks off sideways, I think we can use the horses to drag the others off without causing an avalanche.”

Marcus stepped up. Brynn picked his way back to the horses, ransacked the supply packs and began rigging a set of ropes around the animals’ muscular chests. By the time Marcus had hit away as many lumps as he dared, Brynn was ready to hand a loop of thick rope to Jade. She wrapped it around a chunk of limestone. On her signal, Brynn pulled on the reins of all five horses, yelling and swearing at them. Straining, the horses hauled until

the large block crunched and clattered its way out. Three more times they carried out the same task until, at last, Jade waved Brynn to a halt.

“Phoenix!” She reached down into a niche. Fingers grasped hers. Marcus came to her side, adding his strength. Together they pulled until Phoenix’ whole arm, shoulder and finally his head appeared in the gap. His long, dark hair was streaked white and red with dust and blood. His face was covered in fine white powder. Even his eyelashes and eyebrows were thick with it, making his eyes seem bluer. Blinking, he coughed and spat out a spray of dirt, blood and sand. His round, wooden shield was missing from its usual place on his back and his clothes were torn in several places. Finally they dragged him clear of the rubble and the three sprawled, panting, on the hot sand outside the ruins.

“Thanks,” Phoenix sputtered, sand spraying from his mouth. He lifted his right hand and showed what he held. “I got my sword.”

Jade stared at him for a moment, speechless. Then she reached out and smacked him across the back of the head. Dust flew up in a little cloud. “Idiot! Don’t do that again.”

“Hey!” he rubbed the spot she’d hit. “I’m ok, aren’t I?”

“Yes,” she glared at him, “but how many lives did you lose?” She pointed at the ruby-studded dagger strapped to his hip.

They had started this game with seven lives each. Phoenix had lost one in England, fighting the Romans. Jade lost two in Sweden during run-ins with a troll and the Norse gods. There were now only five whole rubies in the hilt of her dagger. They had no idea what would happen when a final life was lost. Would they awake in the real world again or would they just be dead and stuck forever in this virtual game-world?

Phoenix shrugged and pulled out his dagger. “I took shelter next to the altar. A couple of blocks glanced me, that’s all. My shield got broken to pieces but I don’t think I lost any.....oh.” He turned the dagger over twice, inspecting the sparkling gems.

The others crowded in.

“Oh no,” Jade groaned. Brynn reached out a finger and touched the knife.

There were now three blank, cracked red stones in the handle. He had lost two lives under the collapsed temple. A cold wave of fear swept up Jade’s spine in spite of the blazing sun overhead. Two! They still had this level and two more, even harder levels, to go in this digital world. How could he possibly get through with only four lives?

Looking dazed, Phoenix patted his head and body, apparently feeling for injuries. His hair was matted with blood but he looked perfectly fine.

“I remember a couple of blocks hitting me as I dived for cover but that wasn’t enough to kill me twice,” he protested. The life-rubies stared back at them, undeniable evidence to the contrary.

He jammed the blade back into its sheath. “That’s hardly fair. How can that be fair?” Standing up he slapped at his clothes. Dust showered off him.

Snapping her mouth shut, Jade got up, dusted her backside off, picked up her staff and reached a hand down to Marcus. He grimaced and pulled himself upright.

Phoenix wouldn’t stop. “It’s *not* fair. Jade only lost one life when she got slammed by that troll,” he glared at her as if this were her fault.

“Maybe it’s because life *isn’t* fair and each quest is harder than the last!” She pointed out, trying to stay calm. “We have to be more careful. Each decision could be critical now. Nothing is black-and-white in this world, Phoenix. It’s not just shoot-em-up-or-die, here. We have to *think* or we won’t make it through.”

Her logic only stoked the rising fire in Phoenix’s eyes.

“I *was* thinking,” he growled at her. “I was thinking exactly how far we’d get without Blódbál and the answer is...not very bloody far!”

Irritation flashed through her. She tried to put a lid on the bubbling emotion but some leaked through in her tart reply.

“Well we’ll get farther *with* you than *without* you – sword or no sword. So if you’re done playing at being a hero, can we get on with it?” Without waiting for an answer, she turned on her heel and marched back to the horses.

Honestly. Sometimes he was so impulsive and stupid it was scary. What would happen to her if he’d lost *all* his lives under those rocks? She could be stuck in this world forever and that didn’t bear thinking about. Or what if he lost the amulet that had drawn them here?

“Your amulet!” She gasped, spinning back, anger forgotten. “Did you lose it?” Her stomach clenched with fear. Had he lost his half of the yin-yang amulet? She checked her own half still hung safely around her neck. It did.

Phoenix reached under his shirt and, with an ‘I’m not an idiot’ look, pulled his necklace out to show her. She nodded back and did the same with hers, the shimmering teardrop shapes glittered in the sun.

As long as they still carried the matching, linked halves that had drawn them into this surreal place, they had a chance to getting home again. Without them....who knew what would happen? They might not ever get home. She knew, too, that they could not be allowed to fall into the hands of the arch-badguy of this world, Feng Zhudai.

Phoenix sent her one last glare and turned away. Jade watched with concern as he marched toward the horses. When would they find a balance between them? When would they start to work better as a team, rather than butting heads and arguing? She sighed. She shouldn’t have snapped back at him. He’d had a scare and she knew he hated feeling powerless.

“Looks like Phoenix took dying again as a personal insult.” Marcus’ deep voice shook her out of her gloomy thoughts.

“Wouldn’t you?” Jade raised an eyebrow at him. “I’d say dying is pretty personal.”

“If I had died a warrior’s death, I would be content in the afterlife, dining in the Temple of Jupiter with the gods,” Marcus returned with a shrug, swinging into the saddle.

She eyed him, curious. She climbed onto her own mare and checked that Brynn was safely on his pony. Her own family was, in theory, Christian but in practice she’d never set foot inside a church except for weddings and funerals. It was fascinating to know Marcus followed the old Roman gods. In 80AD the Christian faith was only just starting to gain momentum. The Romans were at two extremes – either busy being converted or having Christians put to death in the colosseum Games.

With Phoenix in the lead, they ambled past the low mudbrick wall that surrounded the pyramid. Glancing at Phoenix’s stiff back, Jade decided to let him be for awhile. Instead, she asked Marcus the question that was foremost on her mind, knowing it was really just a distraction from the problem of how to handle Phoenix.

“Doesn’t it cause problems having so many different gods for people to follow in the Roman Empire?”

Marcus nodded. “Especially here in Egypt. The capital, Alexandria, was built by the Greeks three hundred years ago, so it’s full of temples to the Greek gods. Many of the native Egyptians there still worship their own gods. Then there are the Jews, who fled the destruction of Jerusalem ten years ago; and recently, the evangelist, Mark, came from Rome to preach Christianity to the Egyptians.” He frowned. “Many Egyptians hate Roman rule and the new religion only fuels their anger. The worst are the followers of Set. They sew the seeds of violence and chaos wherever they go. We should avoid them if at all possible. Alexandria is a dark place these days. Even though it is a centre for learning and culture, I would hesitate to return.”

“Centre of learning? Oh!” Jade exclaimed, “of course. The Library of Alexandria was famous. It was supposed to be one of the best collections in the world.”

“Was?” Marcus scowled. “The Library *is* the best in the world. Why do you say ‘was’? Where do you come from that you know of the Library but speak of it in the past tense?”

Shaken, she glanced at Phoenix’s back. He wasn’t likely to feel any sympathy or help her out of a tricky conversation. Jade swallowed hard and thought fast. As far as Marcus and Brynn knew, she and Phoenix were from another world; drawn here by magic and by the matching Yin-yang amulets they both wore. There was no way to explain that this world was a digital construct; that Marcus and Brynn themselves were simply numbers in a computer; that Jade and Phoenix were not the warrior and half-elven Spellweaver they seemed but were just kids trying to get home to the real world.

“We’re not just from another realm,” she admitted, sighing. “We’re sort of from a future world; a future where our past is almost like this world but not quite the same.”

Marcus held her gaze a few moments then looked forward, apparently deep in thought. “A future world where gods do not exist, perhaps? Where there are ‘programmers’, instead?”

She gaped at him. They must have mentioned something about the programmers of this game without thinking. Kicking herself mentally, she hedged. “Kind of.”

“Exactly how far in the future?”

“About two thousand years,” she couldn’t think of a convincing lie, so she had to tell the truth and hope it wouldn’t freak him out.

Marcus’s mouth dropped open then snapped shut again. He shook his head. “It is hard to comprehend that much time. What is your world like? Does the Roman Empire still dominate?”

“I don’t think telling you would do much good, Marcus,” she shook her head. “Our world is so different that most of the words wouldn’t even have meaning for you. I can tell you that the Roman Empire, in our world, lasted about another three hundred years from now before it collapsed.”

“Ah,” the Roman smiled in disbelief, “so what country rules now? Not the Greeks.”

She laughed. “No. Some would claim that a country called The United States of America is the most powerful military force in our world.”

“Where is that?”

Jade waved a hand toward the west. “A long, long way west across the Atlantic ocean – on the other side of the world.” She pointed east. “That way, past the Indian Ocean, are China, India and Australia – also important countries in our time. The world is a big ball, you know; not flat.”

To her surprise, Marcus burst out laughing. She’d rarely seen him smile, let alone laugh. He had a nice laugh. It made his dark eyes sparkle. She grinned back, wondering what she’d said.

“Jade, we have not believed in a flat Earth since Aristotle proposed a round one almost four hundred years ago and Eratosthenes told us the circumference a century later. I learned it as a child.” Marcus chuckled again, shaking his head. “But no Roman Empire? Next you will try to tell me my world is not real, I suppose; just a figment of someone’s imagination.”

She gaped at him then collected herself and looked away. Nothing would induce her to tell him that - even though it was the absolute truth. It was ironic that Marcus could readily believe she had come by magic from another world but not that the Roman Empire could collapse – or that his own world wasn’t real.

Then again, it *seemed* real here. Back on level one, a guide of sorts had even told her and Phoenix it *was* real. It was certainly hard to disbelieve in the dust clogging up her

nose and the heat of the sun on her head. How could she tell Marcus otherwise? How would she feel if someone told her that her own Earth was just the figment of some great Cosmic Game Programmer's imagination? Come to think of it, there really was no way to prove that wasn't true.....

CHAPTER THREE

At that moment, they caught up with Phoenix and Brynn who had stopped and were arguing.

"We need to go *that* way," Brynn pointed east.

"Well I think we need to go west," Phoenix gestured.

Nudging her horse in between theirs, Jade interrupted what bid fair to turn into a heated argument. "What's going on?"

Brynn shook his head. "The horses need water and I say the nearest water is east. The horses *know* which way it is, we just need to let them find it."

"I think it's west," Phoenix insisted.

"Oh for...," Jade groaned. "You could just ask me. Finding water's one of the first things I ever learned." She closed her eyes and murmured a *seeking* spell for water...and....there... the muddy taste of river water lingered on her tongue.

"It's east of here, about eight kilometres. It must be the Nile," she made a face and took a swallow of warm water from her waterskin to get rid of the taste. Ignoring the cheeky way Brynn poked his tongue at Phoenix and the warrior glowered at both of them, she nudged her horse up alongside Phoenix's, glad of an excuse to get away from Marcus' questions.

"Look at that," she pointed south. A kilometre or so away, shimmering in the heat, was another pyramid. This one had an odd shape. Halfway up it changed angles, like the builder had decided he didn't like the original slope and reduced it. The pyramid looked bent. The early afternoon sun gave it a squat, lumpy shadow.

"I wonder why they built it like that?"

"Don't know, don't care," Phoenix barely glanced at it.

"What's up with you?" Jade demanded.

"I'm just not going to let myself get sidetracked by irrelevant stuff anymore," he scowled at the track ahead. "I have to keep focussed on our goal for this level. We have to work out what the 'death of the moon' means then release Anuket. Like you said, we can't make any more mistakes or lose any more lives."

"That doesn't mean we have to ignore everything around us," Jade pointed out. "You never know what's relevant and what's not in this place."

"What do you mean?" The angry edge had gone from his voice but he still sounded bitter.

Jade drew a deep breath, trying to relax and sound non-confrontational. "Well, I'm pretty sure this game isn't simple like most computer games. In most games you're choices are limited, yeah? Kill or be killed, really. Here, it's more like real life – lots of choices; lots of different results from each decision we make; lots of grey areas. In fact, I'm more and more certain that the old lady back in Albion – you know, the one who told us this place is real – is probably right. This is real in its own way. What we do here affects this world - and *our* world. We have to think more; choose carefully; take opportunities."

Phoenix sent her a sceptical glance, so she continued.

"Remember back in Svealand, when you didn't want to go back to Olshammar and fight the troll-mother?" Jade said. "You thought fighting her was a waste of time – a way to get bonus points in the game but not really important."

"Yeah, so?" he shrugged.

"Well, we *chose* to go back and it turned out for the best, didn't it?"

He stared at her in disbelief. "You got *killed*, remember?"

She blinked at him in surprise. “But we got to Asgard a whole lot faster than if we’d stayed in Midgard and trekked all the way to Uppsala.”

“But you got killed again in Asgard!” He seemed fixated on the times she’d been killed and Jade figured that must be what was really bugging him.

“Yeah, I know,” she tried for patience, “and believe me I don’t want to do it again, I still have bruises. I’m just saying that we can’t ignore opportunities that might help us – even if they do put our lives at risk. We have to balance the risk with the benefit.”

Phoenix was silent awhile, hopefully mulling over what she’d said.

“I still say we have to be more focussed on getting through this level and staying alive – nothing else,” his face was set and stubborn.

Jade gave in. “Whatever.” The loss of two more lives had obviously shaken him more than he cared to admit but she really couldn’t disagree with him. They *did* have to be focussed.

After waiting a few minutes, she switched topics. “Any idea where we should go to find this tekhen that Anuket’s supposedly trapped in?”

He shot her a narrow look. “I thought you’d know. You said that, when you were ‘dead’, the old-lady voice told you everything we needed to do in Egypt, India and China, remember? Didn’t the instructions include *where* to do it?”

She shook her head. “Only that we had to release Anuket before the death of the moon and that the tekhen – ‘obelisk’ the Greeks call them – is in one of the major towns along the Nile. The voice didn’t say which one.”

“Great,” his reply sounded distinctly sarcastic. “Another quest where we have to randomly chose a direction and hope it’s the right one. Hopefully someone will conveniently point out our destination again this time – before we end up lost or captured by badguys.”

“Wonder who the badguys will be this time?”

“Probably mummies,” Phoenix grumbled.

Jade shivered. “Ewww. I hope not. I hate those zombie and mummy horror movies. They give me the creeps.” Glancing ahead she saw a collection of low, mud-brick and stone buildings. They didn’t look inhabited. In fact, they looked...dead; half-ruined. She shivered again, her imagination populating them with linen-wrapped zombie-mummies.

She turned in the saddle to catch Marcus’ eye. He trotted up.

“Is that a village?” She pointed to the huddled group of buildings.

Marcus looked around at the two pyramids and various other, mounded structures in the area then shook his head.

“I think it’s a necropolis – a city of the dead. The past pharaohs used to build them – before they started building pyramids. The people of Egypt bury their dead in the desert to save fertile land for farming.”

“Great,” Jade muttered. “Let’s hope we can get past without being attacked by mummies.”

He smiled down at her. “I’ve never heard of mummies attacking people. By the way, the Egyptians call them ‘sah’.”

“Great,” Jade repeated. “Let’s hope we can get past without being attacked by ‘sah’ then. Happy?”

She kept a close eye on the necropolis as the horses ambled past but nothing came shambling out. She felt some of the tension drain away when the ancient, crumbling city had, at last, become just a jumble of outlines on the horizon behind.

After a couple of kilometres, the land changed underfoot. The harsh, blinding ocean of sand-dunes around the pyramids and dead city gave way to dry, cracked, grey dirt and the occasional, stunted tree. Here and there, remnants of ploughed fields showed this land

was farmed; but no crops grew. A few, withered stalks poked miserably up out of the ground. Eddies of wind blew the dusty soil into gritty little whirlwinds.

Jade wrapped her face in a cloth to keep out the worst of the sun and dust. The others followed suit and they all began to look like Tuareg nomads. All they needed were camels.

In the distance, a smudge of green-grey stretched from south to north.

Brynn pointed. "It must be the river." His voice was muffled by the cloth but his eyes were bright with anticipation.

Long before they reached the river, however, they stumbled across a cart-track. The horses stood obediently in the middle of the rutted road as the companions glanced in both directions. It ran roughly north-south but there was nobody to be seen for any distance in either direction.

"Look," Brynn nodded toward the north-east. About two kilometres away were the low, square silhouettes of houses clustered together. "Another necropolis?"

Marcus shook his head. "A village."

"Great," Phoenix pushed back sweaty hair from his dust-streaked face. "We can get water there."

Marcus held out a cautionary hand. "No. There's a well that's closer." Jade looked and saw nothing but a stand of what she recognised as date palms a few hundred metres to the northwest, near the road.

The sun beat down mercilessly upon their heads. By the time they reached the trees, they were all exhausted and sweating. Even though they'd exchanged their furs for lighter clothes, they were all hot and sweaty in gear more suited to the cold British spring. Marcus was the most comfortable as the sun climbed higher and the heat grew more intense. He had reverted to his Roman garb – a short, skirted tunic and sandals. The horses nickered softly at the scent of water and picked up their pace to a fast walk.

Dismounting, the four companions lead their mounts into the shade of the palms. They found a small circle of mud-brick in the centre of the grove. A leather bucket sat forlornly beside it. The water was a long way down and very muddy. It took several bucketloads to let the horses drink their noisy fill and then replenish their own waterskins.

Jade muttered a cleansing spell over the containers, ignoring Phoenix when he raised an eyebrow at her. Up until now their water had come from fresh mountain streams and lakes. It seemed stupid to trust well water in a hot, tropical pre-antibiotic world.

Finally, they sagged into the shade of the date palms. Digging out supplies given to them by the Svear people, they ate half-heartedly, worn down by the heat.

"Something's wrong," Marcus murmured, gnawing on a slab of smoked meat.

"You mean the fact that there's nobody attacking us right now?" Brynn's comment was muffled by a mouthful of food. Phoenix brushed a stray crumb off his shoulder and scowled at the boy.

"No," Marcus frowned, "I mean the fact that it's spring and the farmers aren't harvesting their crops. The Nile floods in summer and fertilises these plains. The farmers plant in autumn and by spring they are harvesting. Where are the crops?" He swept a piercing look around the dry, cracked riverflat.

The others sat up and looked around. Jade picked up a handful of soil and crumbled it beneath her fingers. It was grey and very dry. To her Elven senses the land felt almost dead. "Maybe the river didn't flood?"

Marcus nodded, his expression pensive. "That has happened in the past but it causes great famines and poverty. We will need to be careful. The Roman Emperor, Titus, taxes these people heavily, taking their crops for Rome. We may be a target for thieves." He glanced up at their well-packed belongings.

Jade patted her personal backpack. "I keep the Hyllion Bagia in here with me. If we lose the rest it doesn't really matter that much."

"Hey," Phoenix sounded indignant, "I like having food and tents, thanks. You woodsy elf-people might like the great outdoors but I prefer a roof, a bed and a change of clothes."

He plucked at the sweaty, heavy wool shirt and iron-studded leather armour he wore. "Speaking of clothes, have we got *anything* cooler than this stuff? I'm boiling."

Jade sighed. "All the clothes we have are more suited to cold weather. We need to get whatever the locals wear so we can blend in. Marcus?"

The Roman nodded. "We do look different and I, certainly, would rather not wear Roman garb outside the capital. We'll need the white linen tunics worn by the peasants. We may need to darken our skin, too - and hide your ears and hair, Jade."

Jade looked across the bleak, listless landscape at the distant village. Laying her staff across her knees, she closed her eyes and drew on something she'd read in her new spellbook but hadn't yet tried. Softly, she murmured '*harken*' and concentrated on the houses. A weird, displaced feeling stole over her. The voices nearby became oddly muffled. It felt like her ears were soaring across the grey fields. Suddenly she was "hearing" inside the cluster of mudbrick houses: hearing silence. Not a voice; not even a dogbark nor the soft scurry of a rodent. Nothing stirred but a slight breeze.

"Oh!" Opening her eyes, she found the others looking at her with puzzled concern. "The village is empty."

Phoenix turned down the corners of his mouth. "If the farmers have left, it must be bad. They probably didn't leave any convenient clothing behind, either. So the question is... which way now?"

"And which direction do we go to find the tekhen where Anuket is imprisoned? We have no idea which city it's in," she added.

Marcus held up a hand as though to stop her rising worries. "Most of the tekhen were originally in the ancient capital, Mennufer. The Greeks called it Memphis."

"Originally?" Brynn prompted.

"First the Greeks and then we Romans kindly moved most of them when we took over."

"Where to?" Phoenix asked.

Marcus looked down and poked a stick into the loose earth. "Alexandria."

"So why the long face?"

Jade jumped in to spare Marcus having to explain again. "Marcus says Alexandria's dangerous at the moment. It's become very...ummm... multicultural and there are some clashes. The Egyptians don't like the Romans; the Romans don't like the Jews or the Greeks... you know."

"Sounds just like home," Phoenix muttered, grimacing. "You'd think we'd learn, wouldn't you? What about the Muslims?"

Marcus looked blankly at him? "Who are they?"

Phoenix cast an inquiring look at Jade.

She thought for a moment then shrugged. "I don't think the Islamic faith comes along until about 600AD. Anyway, we should still check out Memphis, just in case," she brought the conversation back on track. "Then, if the tekhen is there, we won't have to go to Alexandria at all."

With a snort and a fierce grin, Phoenix slapped at the handle of his sword. "Fat chance. You can bet that Anuket's prison is going to be in the most dangerous place it can be. We should head straight for Alexandria."

"Probably, but we'd be stupid to bypass Memphis just on a hunch," Jade argued. "Remember - each decision could be critical."

"I suppose," Phoenix's expression said he disagreed, "but we're on a time-limit here, remember? The death of the moon and all that?"

"I know," she gnawed on her bottom lip. "I've been thinking about that. It has to have something to do with the phases of the moon - waxing and waning." When the others stared at her with varying degrees of blankness, she continued. "I think it must mean the waning phase - when the moon is getting smaller. I just don't know if it means at the beginning of the waning or the end."

Phoenix stared up at the bright sky in thought. "Wasn't it a full moon just the other night?"

Jade nodded, remembering. "The first night we were in Svealand. So you're right, it can't mean the beginning of the waning phase, or we'd have missed the deadline already. It can only mean either the last quarter or the dark-moon."

"That sounds appropriate," he grimaced. "So how long do we have?"

"I've sort of lost track," she had to admit, "with all the skipping from country to country but the first night of the last quarter-moon can only be maybe one or two nights away."

"Cutting it fine then - as usual." He turned to Brynn and swatted the Breton boy on the shoulder, making him choke as he swallowed a mouthful of water. "So, if we come across an inhabited village, are you up for some sneaking and thieving?"

Brynn wiped his mouth and nodded eagerly. "What do we need; just clothes?"

"Phoenix!" Jade was outraged. "We don't need to steal. We have a bag full of Roman coins, remember?" She shook her backpack.

Marcus laid a soothing hand on hers. "As much as I hate to descend to common theft, Phoenix might be right in this instance. Hatred of the Romans is deep. Trying to buy clothes with denarii might cause more problems than stealing them."

"Can't we leave a horse or something in exchange?" Jade begged.

Marcus shook his head. "Peasants don't own horses - it would cause comment."

Jade pressed her lips together and turned to repack their gear. It just didn't feel right to steal from farmers who were already suffering from the drought.

Behind her, Phoenix questioned Marcus about which way to go.

"So where's Memphis?" He swung himself back into the saddle and patted his horse's neck as the stallion tossed its head.

Marcus mounted and gathered up the reins. "North," he nodded downstream. "I believe most of these pyramids and burial sites lie west and south of Memphis, so it ought to be that way."

CHAPTER FOUR

They followed the road north, keeping the horses to a walk as the afternoon wore on. Only half an hour later, another small village came into view not far from the road. This one had people in it.

Jade used the *harken* listening spell again and spent several minutes staring into space while the other three waited. At last, she opened her eyes

“Man, that’s a handy spell you’ve picked up,” Phoenix gave her his grudging admiration. He was still irritated at her know-it-all motherly attitude but there was no doubt she had skills.

Waving a hand as though brushing aside his compliment, she spoke in earnest tones. “We can’t steal from these people, Phoenix”

He sought for patience and leaned to one side, easing his butt in the saddle. It really was too hot to argue but they did need the clothes. “Why not?”

She pursed her lips at him. “They have nothing. I heard them say that the Roman tax collectors came through this village, Saqqara, yesterday and took even the last of their livestock. They’ve had to sell members of their own families as slaves to the Romans, just to eat!” There was a mulish expression around her mouth.

Phoenix blinked at her, astonished. “They’ve *sold* their families?”

She nodded. “Or some of them have gone off into other parts of Africa to hunt big game animals for the Roman Games. Some have even volunteered to become gladiators! Others went to try and find work in Memphis and Alexandria. The ones who are left are starving and desperate. I *won’t* steal their clothes.”

Marcus grimaced. “I was afraid of this. We’ll have to try a bigger town. Memphis should only be an hour or so north.”

“Let’s get going then,” Phoenix nudged his horse with a heel to get it moving. The others followed suit with an air of resignation. Jade glanced back at the village several times, obviously wishing they could be helped. Phoenix was glad she didn’t suggest it. Last time they’d helped villagers in trouble, she had lost a life and they really had to avoid that sort of thing if they wanted to win this game.

After only a more few minutes of riding, Phoenix cast a shrewd glance at her and another at the sun. Her pale skin was flushed with heat and sunburn. As a half-elf, her close connection with all things growing and living must be tenuous in this parched, lifeless land. Without the cool, green woods of Albion and Svealand, she had to be suffering more than the others. He felt the first twinges of real worry. She might annoy the heck out of him but he still felt responsible for her. He called out to Marcus, who led.

“Wait up. We still have several hours until dusk. If Memphis is so close then maybe we should find a shady place and wait until evening to find it and get clothes?”

“Good idea,” Jade’s voice was faint.

At that moment, a breeze sprang up in their faces. Rather than being blessedly cooling, it was a hot, dry wind that snatched at their loosened clothing and tossed gritty dirt into their eyes. Hastily, they wrapped cloth over their noses and mouths again.

“Which way do we go to find shelter?” Jade’s weary question was muffled.

Marcus pointed to the west. Not far away, the fertile ground ended abruptly against the desert. A short distance beyond that were low, rocky valleys and hills.

“There’s nothing there,” Phoenix protested.

“There are more necropoli and tombs. Look,” Marcus pointed at one of the hills. Phoenix squinted then blinked in surprise. What he had taken for a small hill was actually a

crumbling pyramid. Instead of being smooth-sided, like Snefru's, this one looked like a giant staircase – its sides were enormous steps.

"There will be accessible tombs near that mer. We shouldn't be disturbed." Marcus added.

"Except by mummies," Jade's muttered comment was almost inaudible, so Phoenix ignored it.

They turned the horses west and headed into the desert again. The horses whinnied in protest when their unshod hooves touched the hot sand. Phoenix patted his stallion reassuringly and urged him to go a little faster. All the animals picked up their pace and the dry valleys came closer.

It took very little time to reach the first buildings but most were either collapsed ruins or too buried in sand to be useful. Turning north, they found a dry wadi. In this, a recent landslide had uncovered what appeared to be a door. Well, it was a slab of stone with two carved pillars on either side, set into the wall of the valley.

After some discussion, they decided to move on in search of an opened tomb. They had already destroyed one ancient building today. They were out of luck. Further north were only more ruins, desert and the step pyramid. When Marcus mentioned that the entrances to pyramids were usually high up in the sloping walls they decided to ignore it.

Phoenix glanced at Jade. She was wilting in the heat. The wind picked up, too and they all suffered from its effects. Out here, it carried sand and forced each grain deep into their clothes and eyes. It was becoming hard to see and breathe. His nose felt like it had an entire beach in it.

"Er..Phoenix?" Brynn's too-casual tone got his attention. He was staring off into the southeast, looking worried. "What's that?"

They followed his pointing finger. Beyond the Nile floodplains, a massive smudged wall of grey-brownness towered into the otherwise clear blue sky.

"Storm clouds?" Phoenix hazarded.

"No," Marcus sounded troubled. "It's the sirocco."

"The what?" A 'sirocco' sounded like something you'd order in an Italian restaurant; or perhaps a flavour of icecream; but Marcus' tone carried the conviction that it wasn't anything that good.

"A sandstorm carried by fierce winds that come every year at this time," Marcus watched the massive storm front. "Trust me, we *do not* want to be caught out in it."

"How long til it gets here?" Brynn cast anxious looks at the distant blur.

"No more than fifteen or twenty minutes," Marcus's answer shocked them into action.

"*What?*" Phoenix spun his horse on its heels. "We can't worry about destruction of ancient property any more. We have to get to that unopened tomb back there. Agreed?"

They all kicked their horses into motion. The animals seemed to sense their fear and responded, jumping straight to a slow canter. Brynn clung on for dear life, his thin legs and elbows flapping as his pony followed Jade's bay back out of the dead end they had been searching.

By the time they reached the mouth of the valley, the wind had already picked up speed and more sand. Phoenix could feel grains grating in his mouth, his ears, his eyes and clogging up his nose. It seemed to be working its way into every crack and crevice of his body. He could barely see through slitted, sand-clotted eyelids and it was harder to breathe as dust clogged the cloth over his mouth.

How the heck were they going to find that tomb again? The air was already thick and dense. Visibility dropped. In a few minutes they'd be lucky to be able to see their own hands.

He'd underestimated Jade. Spurring her horse ahead, she made some odd gesture with one hand then pointed toward the south. Next, a length of rope slapped Phoenix in the thigh and he barely managed to grab it before it slid to the ground. Looking up, he saw the length extended from Jade's saddle, to Marcus' and on to his. Quickly, he wrapped a couple of loops around his arm then flicked the rest to Brynn. The boy caught it and gave him the thumbs up. Relieved that they wouldn't get separated, Phoenix signalled to Jade. She kicked her horse into a trot and they forged ahead through the darkening day.

It seemed to take an hour to make the short return trip to the unopened tomb. Every second made the wind's howling louder, the sting of sand sharper, the suffocating heat worse. The horses began to fidget and toss their heads, sidling sideways to try and keep their faces out of the wind. Soon they'd be going backwards. Just when Phoenix was certain Jade had missed the tomb, the rope tugged at his arm, pulling him to the right. He hauled blindly on the reins. His horse whickered in protest but obeyed.

The stallion stumbled to a halt, its nose in the tail of Marcus' horse. Phoenix heard Brynn's muffled protest from behind as his horse jerked to a halt. Sliding off his mount, Phoenix grabbed the reins and kept a tight hold of the rope. He could barely see two feet in front of his face now and every exposed inch of skin felt like it was being sandpapered off. Every breath drawn was heavy with grit and tasted of dirt. They were all coughing now. Hunching over, he leaned into the wind and pulled with both hands, following the rope closer to Marcus – he hoped.

The dark shapes of Marcus, Jade and their horses loomed up. All the companions huddled together in the middle of a horse-circle of protection.

"The door is just there," Jade shouted, pointing behind her. "Marcus is going to have to use the hammer again. We don't have time to dig or hunt for secret levers."

Marcus unlimbered the god's weapon. Handing his reins to Jade, he staggered over to the smooth slab and swung the hammer in a test circle. Even over the howl of the sandstorm, they could hear the distant rumble of thunder generated by Mjollnir. Fleeting, Phoenix wondered if Marcus could cause rain – and whether that would just turn the flying dust and sand into a mud-storm.

There was an almighty *crash*. Phoenix looked up in sudden concern. Marcus' actions might trigger another sandslide – one that would bury the door, rather than revealing it. Luck was with them. The stone imploded and a gaping, dark void appeared in the valley wall.

Jade stepped forward but Phoenix grabbed her arm.

"What if the air's bad?"

"I don't think we have much choice," she yelled. "We won't go far in – just enough to get out of the worst of this."

He nodded, spitting out sand, reluctant to open his mouth again.

Within moments, they managed to coax all the nervous horses into what appeared to be a small antechamber. They couldn't close the door, as its remains now lay as scattered debris over the flagged stone floor; but the horses seemed content to stand with their backsides to the opening, serving as a wind-break for the humans. Dust still swirled in the hot air but the wind carried the worst of the driving sand away from the opening. Even the terrifying howl of the sirocco was muted to a bearable shriek by thick stone.

Jade lit a few little green witch-lights and sent them floating through the dusty air. Tugging at the cloth over his eyes and nose, Phoenix tried to blink and rub away the worst of the grit. His eyes felt like the Sandman had dumped his entire sack into them. Unstopping his waterskin, he dribbled a few drops of precious water into each eye before taking a much-needed swallow to clear his mouth. Dampening a cloth, he gently wiped the

stallion's gritty eyes clean, too. The animal nuzzled him with affection and stomped on the stone floor.

Finally over his fit of pique and feeling slightly less suffocated, Phoenix glanced around the tomb with interest. It did seem to be more like an antechamber, with a wide, dark exit in the wall opposite the entrance. There were pillars and decorated walls all around but no sarcophagi. That meant no mummies. Jade would be happy.

He turned to tell her so but found she'd wandered over to inspect the hieroglyphs on the nearest wall.

"It says we're in the tomb of Mehu, Chief Justice and Vizier to Pharaoh Pepi the First," she called out, tracing her fingers over the complex hieroglyphs. Above the pictographs was a brightly painted carving of a man. Brown-skinned and with straight, shoulder-length black hair, he sat on a carved chair with his right hand outstretched, touching what looked like a model boat. He held a stick of some sort in his left hand. All around him were more hieroglyphs. Jade pointed at them.

"They're all telling of his greatness; his usefulness to the Pharaoh; the names of his three wives: Iku, Nebt and Nefertkawes."

"Vizier, huh?" Phoenix grinned as she jumped. "They always turn out to be the bad guy, as far as I can tell."

"Don't sneak up on me like that," she scolded.

He laughed mockingly at her reaction. "Scared of the mummies?"

"If you had seen the movie, 'The Mummy', you would be, too," Jade said, shuddering.

"Hey, that was a great movie. Anyway, looks like Brynn's keen to investigate." He glanced over at the dark exit. Brynn was already there, peering in, trying to coax one of Jade's witch-lights to precede him.

With a grimace, Jade wrapped her arms around herself and backed away. "No thank you. We should all stay here."

"I think you've got zero chance of persuading Brynn to stay here when there might be treasure down there." Phoenix pointed out.

"What about staying focussed and not getting sidetracked?" She put her hands on her hips.

He shrugged. "I still think that's what we need to do but like I said, I think we have zero chance of stopping Brynn. Besides," he admitted with slight difficulty, "I did listen before. I think you're right about taking opportunities. I keep forgetting that things might not be completely random here; that opportunities might come up for a reason."

Jade blinked at him, her mouth falling open.

He gave her a wry grin. "Sorry. I know I overreacted but I've thought about it." He pointed outside, into the howling, dusty windstorm. "This storm came up awfully quickly. We might be here for a reason. Besides, it's not like we're going anywhere for awhile. We may as well investigate - carefully."

"But what about curses and things?" She eyed the decorated walls as though trying to decipher all the hieroglyphs at once.

"C'mon," Phoenix scoffed, "you don't believe in ancient Egyptian curses, do you?"

She sent him a long, cool look. "Not in *our* world, no."

He stared back at her for a moment and frowned. "Good point. Look, I don't want us to take unnecessary risks. We need all our lives. But if we don't go with him, you can bet Brynn will go on his own and get in trouble. We'll just have to be careful and we could use your help."

Hearing them, Brynn sent her a pleading look over his shoulder. "Come on. We need your lights. Please?"

Closing her eyes, Jade sighed. "I guess it's probably safer for us all to stay together, mummies or not." She tied their horses' reins to various chunks of exploded door, created some more lights and joined the others. Shoulder to shoulder, the four of them stood facing the blackness of the tomb. Phoenix laid a hand on his sword, feeling his blood quicken as its fire tingled in his veins.

As Jade sent the first of the witch-lights bobbing ahead, she sighed again, "So explain to me again why we're going *into* a tomb full of dead people?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Her voice echoed down the tunnel ahead, followed by the staccato of their bootheels on the stone floor.

Brynn grinned up at her. "Treasure?"

"We don't *need* treasure," Jade frowned at him.

The boy grunted. "*You* might not where you come from but *I* can always use it. Besides, there's no point sitting around here getting sand in our ears. May as well see what's down there."

"It's only a vizier's tomb," Jade reminded them. "It's not like he'll be buried with lots of gold like a Pharaoh."

Brynn looked at her straitly. "Even a little bit is more than I have right now. Remember – part of our original deal was that I get a cut of any treasure we find."

"You can have all the Roman coins in the Hyllion Bagia," she returned.

He cocked his head, dark eyes twinkling. "Thanks, I'll hold you to that but how can you resist the temptation to find out what's down here?"

"Easily," she said sourly. Then they emerged into a slightly bigger room and she gasped. "I take it back. This is incredible."

Brynn grunted, clearly unimpressed. Jade ignored him. The walls were richly decorated with images of daily life in Egypt; all in exquisite, jewel colours. All around were pictures of people hunting and fishing in swamplands; trapping birds, mending nets, preparing food. The background was a beautiful grey-blue colour that made the brown-skinned people seem almost lifelike.

Another short corridor led into a longer one that was similarly carved and painted with images of harvesting, baking, sailing, metalworking and fishing. Jade sighed in awe and ran her fingers over the bright colours, amazed at their clarity and beauty.

"C'mon!" Brynn's eager call interrupted her thoughts. The boy had found a doorway leading off the corridor to the right. She sent three lights in with him as he vanished through it. Phoenix shook his head and hurried after with Marcus close behind. Jade reluctantly left the corridor and followed.

"Wow!" Even Brynn couldn't fail to be impressed by the size and grandeur of the room they entered. He stood in the middle, gazing raptly around. The roof was supported by two square pillars near the far end and the tomb's owner, Mehu, gazed serenely down at them from both columns. All around, the walls were adorned with rich images of servants gardening and carrying food offerings to Mehu. There was no furniture or sarcophagi.

At the far end of the room, between the pillars, was what appeared to be a large door, ornately carved in hieroglyphs. Brynn hurried over, beckoning her closer.

"What does it say?" He jiggled in eagerness.

Jade frowned, scanning the pictographs. She shook her head. "It's just a dedication to Mehu's son, Kahotep. I don't think it's a real door."

Disappointed, he pushed and pulled at the wall but nothing opened under his touch so he turned away. She held her breath. No mummies and no treasure. Maybe he would give up now.

Her hope was short-lived. After he dashed back out into the corridor, they heard his excited voice calling again and jogged to catch up. At the other end of the long hall, he'd found yet another dark doorway.

Here were scenes of people picking fruit and bringing animal offerings to Mehu. The walls danced with images of bulls, gazelle, oryx, fruits and birds. Beyond that was another room lined with musicians and dancers. Two more openings lead out of the room. Brynn peered into one and emerged looking crestfallen.

“Just more decorations. No treasure at all. Not even a statue!” Glum, the boy wandered over to the last room and stuck his head in.

By this time, Jade’s fears were evaporating. Mehu’s tomb was gloriously ornamented but it seemed to be empty of either treasure or terrifying undead. She watched Brynn’s disappointment with understanding and a trace of amusement. Phoenix followed him into the room. Jade and Marcus trailed in after them.

“Hey look, a coffin!” Brynn’s excited comment sent a shiver down her spine and all her worries returned in a rush. Coffins meant mummies....

“Rats,” he was standing beside a stone sarcophagus, looking into it disgustedly. The stone lid was pushed askew and the floor was littered with shards of broken pottery, thickly covered in dust. “It’s empty. Not even a body!”

Jade tried to look upset but in reality she was hugely relieved. She inspected the open coffin for herself, glad to confirm that Mehu’s *sah* wasn’t there. Hieroglyphs and painted images on the lid and sides confirmed that the vizier had, indeed, been entombed there. Robbers must have found this place long ago and managed to open and close the front entrance without leaving traces. There was nothing left of any treasure Mehu might have had with him in the chamber. Even his body and the small icons that would have been wrapped with him were gone.

Brynn wandered away and began inspecting the end wall.

“What does this one say, Jade?” His tone said he wasn’t hoping for much any more but was determined not to overlook anything.

She looked over and saw yet another false door. This one was beautifully carved and painted a dark red colour so the hieroglyphs, which were carved into the white limestone wall, stood out clearly in the dim light.

Skimming the texts, she translated. “It seems to be mostly about Mehu himself. All his titles and jobs – Vizier; Chief Justice; Seal-bearer to the King of Lower Egypt; Overseer of Upper Egypt; Overseer of all Judges and Law-courts; Sole friend to the King; Overseer of the two Treasuries. That sort of thing.” She raised her eyebrows. “It says he was some sort of priest, too; or a prophet, maybe. He must have been a pretty important guy.”

“Two Treasuries!” Brynn caught her words, face alight. “So if he was that important, where’s his body? Where’s his treasure?”

“It’s obviously been stolen,” Jade pointed out.

“But it says *two* treasuries,” Brynn shot back. “Maybe he just had a few things here because he knew his tomb would be broken into. Maybe he hid the rest.”

She turned, glancing pointedly around the empty room for treasure that wasn’t there. There were a few low plinths where statues might have stood but otherwise, nothing. Even Phoenix and Marcus looked doubtful. Brynn, however, was not to be deterred. He examined the false door, knocking on it with his knuckles and listening hard.

“I’m sure it sounds hollow. Maybe this one’s not a fake door. Did you read everything it says?” He ran his hands over the stone frame. “Maybe there’s a clue to how to open it!”

Plainly, he wasn’t going to give up, so Jade read further. She pointed to the middle. “Here’s a bit about making an offering to Anubis, god of Embalming and mummy-wrapping. And here’s something about an offering to Osiris, judge of the dead and god of the underworld. It’s a wish for Mehu to be passed onto the beautiful roads to the West to join Osiris.” She read silently for awhile, ignoring Brynn’s anxious movements beside her.

“There’s a whole lot about the food offerings – thousands of ducks and geese, beer,

clothing and other stuff. Man, if they'd really included all that in here we'd be knee deep in animal bones and there wouldn't be room for treasure."

"What, no mention of treasure at all?" he wailed.

She shook her head. "Sorry. The only thing that puzzles me is this," she pointed to the upper left-hand corner of one column of hieroglyphs. "It seems to say that he's the Overseer of the Two Treasuries but it also kind of says that he's the *owner* of the two Treasuries. It's almost like a play on words – a pun." She indicated another pictograph on the opposite side of the door. "And this one over here that says he's the Overseer of the Palace could also be saying he's *under* the palace. I wonder..."

Almost casually, not really expecting any result, Jade reached up and touched the first carving, pushing on the one she'd indicated. It gave a little beneath her fingers but nothing happened.

"Phoenix, can you reach the other one and push it at the same time?" She nodded as he moved forward. Together they pressed the stone. There was a faint, gritty, grinding noise. Jade gasped and jerked her hand away. Phoenix did the same. The noise stopped. Brynn clutched at her arm, fingers digging into her skin.

"Do it again! Do it again!" He bounced on his toes in anticipation.

She sent a worried look at Phoenix, who shrugged and raised his eyebrows. There was no turning back now. They pushed at the stonework. Again there came a faint grating noise as ancient mechanisms struggled to work. They pushed harder. A thin, vertical crack appeared down the right edge of the door. It widened. Brynn squeaked in excitement and worked his fingers into the gap. He pulled and the crack opened another inch....and another.

He stepped back, coughing. "Smells awful." He waved a hand in front of his face then took a fresh grip on the door and planted his foot against the frame. "C'mon. Help me!"

Marcus added his strength. Jade and Phoenix kept their fingers on the door mechanism. Bit by bit, the heavy slab door slid back until they were faced with yet another gaping, black hole.

"Wait!" Jade grabbed Brynn's arm as the boy rushed forward. "Let me try a cleansing spell on the air." She sent the enchantment in and felt the drain on her strength as it worked on the ancient, fetid atmosphere. When it was done, she hesitated. Brynn jiggled from foot to foot. She bit her lip.

"I have a bad feeling about this, Brynn."

"Like the feeling you had about the troll in Svealand?" Phoenix asked, holding Brynn back.

She shook her head. "Nothing so strong. It might be just my own fears, to be honest. Maybe I'm just being paranoid."

"Still," Phoenix looked at her and at the entrance. "We need to be careful. This was well hidden. Maybe there are traps." He drew Blódbál. Marcus unhooked the hammer of Thor. Brynn pulled out his own sword, narrowly missing slicing Phoenix' arm as he did so. Phoenix frowned at him and the boy grinned and muttered something about needing more training.

Jade hefted her quarterstaff and gripped it. Whatever was in there, they had to face it now. The choice had been made. Taking a slow, audible breath, Phoenix squared his shoulders and glanced over at her. Jade nodded back, hoping the consequences of their choice would be good this time. She wasn't going to hold her breath, though.

She sent five of her witch-lights zipping into the dark doorway. This new tunnel wasn't flat like the others. It descended steeply into the earth, the stone floor sloping into more darkness. The ceiling was lower, too. Only Brynn would be able to walk upright.

“Wait,” Jade said again, as Brynn raised his foot to step over the threshold. “Hang on a minute.” Without another word, she handed her quarterstaff to Marcus and dashed out of the room, leaving the other three to exchange baffled looks, probably wondering if she’d bolted in fear of mummies.

They hadn’t moved by the time she returned moments later, cradling a large lump of broken rock to her stomach. With a grunt, she dropped it and shoved it across the floor so it rested against the door frame.

“Huh?” Phoenix raised an eyebrow at her before understanding dawned. She’d placed the stone so it would stop the door from sliding completely closed again.

“Uh-huh,” she grinned at him. “Benefits of watching too many adventure movies. The secret door *always* closes behind the heroes, leaving them trapped in the airtight chamber.”

“O...K...” Phoenix obviously wasn’t sure whether to be worried or impressed. “Er... shall we go now?”

“Lead on,” she waved him ahead.

The four companions stepped over the threshold and stopped, watching the door expectantly. Nothing happened. The three boys looked at Jade. She raised her chin.

“Well, it *might* have closed behind us and left us trapped.”

Phoenix patted her on the arm. “True.”

She sent him a narrow, irritated look, which he pretended not to see.

Brynn now took the lead, slipping on the smooth, sand-strewn stone. The walls here were plain, unornamented limestone. They had been hewn into the bedrock and left with toolmarks still visible.

“Whatever’s down here, Mehu really didn’t expect it to be seen by anyone,” Jade whispered. Phoenix nodded, clutching his sword.

They slipped and slid to the end of the steep tunnel. At the bottom, it split into two; one tunnel angled to the left and one turned sharply right and seemed to continue straight for a fair distance. However the left passageway went only a few metres before it was blocked by a rockfall. Massive chunks of limestone rubble filled the space from floor to ceiling. If it had ever led to untold treasure and wealth, there was no way of getting to it now.

They took the right fork. This lead north for two hundred metres before ending abruptly in another door. Instead of dozens of carved and painted hieroglyphs, this one had just a few, rough ones etched into the frame.

“It says ‘welcome to the pyramid of Netjerikhet’, second of the Two Treasuries of Mehu,” Jade translated. She opened her eyes wide in surprise. “So that’s what he meant – he’s dug into someone else’s tomb and pretended that their treasure is his. How sneaky!”

Phoenix frowned. “Got it!” He snapped his fingers. “Sneaky is right. I’ll bet old Mehu dug underneath that step-pyramid we saw. That’s where we are.”

Jade looked up, half-expecting to see the pyramid towering over their heads but there was only stone.

Brynn ran his hands over the closed door slab, hunting for a trigger. Phoenix, Marcus and Jade stepped up to help, inspecting the plain door and frame. Phoenix found the first pressure pad; then Jade found a second and Marcus found yet another. This time, all three of them pressed together and were rewarded with a grinding noise that resounded in the small space. Brynn let out a muted cheer as the door began to slide back.

As a precaution, Jade sent another cleansing spell ahead into the darkness. She staggered as her energy levels plummeted. Marcus caught her elbow.

“Are you ok?” Phoenix asked, sounding worried.

She nodded. "Just a little tired. Too many spells and not enough forest around me." Sending him a determined smile, she straightened and sent several little lights zipping through the gap. "Let's see what Mehu was hiding."

CHAPTER SIX

At first sight, the treasure chamber beneath the step pyramid was a big disappointment. The four adventurers stepped through the door and came abruptly up against a blank wall that extended into darkness left and right. Brynn let out a cry of frustration but Phoenix shushed him with an impatient movement.

"I feel something....that way," he pointed left.

"What?" Brynn turned to peer into the darkness.

"It feels like a breeze," Phoenix touched his cheek and sniffed the air. "Smells musty. Let's check it out."

Jade sent more lights ahead and, sure enough, within a few metres the narrow corridor opened out into a massive, low-roofed chamber. Even Brynn stopped short in shock at the sight of what lay in that room.

"Oh...my...." Phoenix breathed. His soft words echoed around the room. For a long moment, the four simply stared, unable to believe the incredible wealth lying in front of them. Massive, square columns marched off into the darkness in neat rows, supporting a low stone roof. Piled up around the base of each column, and strewn carelessly across the floor, were stacks of gleaming, glistening golden artefacts.

Along every wall leaned rows of golden sarcophagi, propped up against the stone. Ornately decorated in gold and gems, each depicted a different face on the lid – some women, some men. It was as though someone had taken the coffins and treasure of dozens of different royal burials and moved them all into this one, secret place. More offerings were piled haphazardly around their feet. Plates, goblets, large and small animal figures, model boats, strange animal-headed people figurines – all made in softly shining, dusty gold. Even large pieces of furniture seemed to be made of the stuff, although Phoenix suspected it may just be plated. Surely nobody would make an entire table, chairs and even a life-sized boat out of solid gold.

Brynn broke the silence with an exultant whoop of delight. He sprinted to the first pile of treasure and ran his hands over a small, wooden chest before opening it. Inside were gems, trinkets, bracelets, rings and hair ornaments – all in gold, silver and jewels.

"Bring the Hyllion Bagia, Jade," the boy demanded, already stuffing smaller items in the pockets of his patched clothing.

"Do you really think we should be doing this?" Jade slowly passed the magic bag to him. "I mean, how will we explain all this stuff if we get caught with it? Won't people think we're grave-robbers?" She cast an uneasy look at the nearest golden coffins.

Brynn stared at her and blinked. "So? We just take the small, easy-to-hide stuff. Ohh, I wonder what this is?" he held up a small crystal bottle full of blue liquid. Shrugging, he tossed it into the Bag along with a ring in the shape of a scarab beetle and a tiara shimmering with diamonds.

Phoenix, who had initially felt the same urge as Brynn to stuff his pockets, was now thinking twice about the situation. Like any other kid, he'd always imagined how cool it would be to find a treasure trove and become instantly rich but his imaginary treasures had always belonged to long-dead pirates. Somehow it didn't feel right to take the grave-offerings of an ancient Egyptian nobleman. It wasn't like he could take it back to the real world with him, anyway. He put down the golden cup he'd picked up and dusted his hands off.

Next to him Jade shifted, looking uncomfortable. "I really don't like this. There are just too many sarcophagi – and mummies here." She whispered to him. "I have a baaad feeling things are going to go wrong."

Phoenix glanced around but nothing moved in the dusty gloom. Nevertheless, a prickle of unease stirred the hairs on the back of his neck. She was probably right - best not to tempt the powers that be. This place reeked of potential for disaster. Any minute now the ceiling would begin to squash them, or the mummies would come to life.

He looked down at Brynn, busily shovelling small, golden items into the Hyllion Bagia as fast as he could. The boy's uncomplicated attitude toward theft bothered him somewhat, too. It was another indication of how different his upbringing had been to his own; how different his whole life was. At ten years old, Brynn was an orphan in this violent, ancient world – his parents and siblings killed by Feng Zhudai. Although Phoenix's dad was gone, at least he still had his mother – and Jacob wasn't the absolute worst stepfather in the world. Brynn had to look after himself.

"I can't stay and watch him," Jade muttered. She moved away. Phoenix was glad to see Marcus join her when her wandering steps carried her close to the first of the sarcophagi. Together, they moved along the row of sarcophagi, back toward the exit.

Phoenix was about to call a halt to Brynn's thieving spree when Jade paused next to one of the coffins. He wondered what had caught her attention. It was close to the entrance, slightly apart from the rest. It was also much less elaborate – made of wood and with little gold on the plainly painted face. It didn't seem to fit in with the opulence of all the others. She moved closer to inspect the hieroglyphs on the lid. Inexplicably troubled, Phoenix opened his mouth to call out to her.

Too late.

The wooden lid sprang open and *something* fell out of the casket. It's hideously shrunken, linen-wrapped body turned as it fell; thin hands reached for her throat; the musty stench of long-rotted flesh swept across the room; sunken, sightless eyes and broken teeth screamed soundlessly in the shadows.....

Jade's shriek of terror stabbed through the chamber and bounced off the stone walls. Phoenix was already running. Behind, Brynn yelped and leaped to his feet, snatching up the Bag. He caught up with Phoenix in a flash. Skidding to a halt, they found Jade and Marcus standing beside the open coffin, twin looks of horror and disgust on their faces. Jade shook uncontrollably, her face white; Marcus' arm around her waist seemed to be all that kept her on her feet. At their feet lay a twisted, emaciated body, partially wrapped in decaying cloth. Brown, withered fingers poked out of the bandage. Three had snapped completely off. Yellow teeth grinned horribly from a wasted head, still partly covered in blackened, shiny skin.

Gulping, Phoenix managed to ask, "What happened?" His own heart raced as he waited to see if the gruesome, fleshless figure would move. Blodbal sang eagerly in his head, ready to chop off any grasping, skeletal fingers.

Jade shuddered and looked away, burying her face in Marcus' shoulder.

Marcus, also pale, swallowed. "We came to look at the casket and this..." he pointed to the body, "fell out on us."

"You didn't touch it or open it?" Phoenix demanded.

Both of them shook their heads.

"But it didn't actually attack you or anything," he prompted.

Marcus sent him a bewildered look. "How could it? It's dead."

Phoenix waved a dismissive hand at him. "Never mind. Maybe it's time to go."

Jade nodded fervently but Brynn wailed in dismay.

"C'mon. Just a little longer. Look at all this stuff!"

Phoenix gripped the boy above the elbow, his fingers digging into a pressure point. "I think you've got enough. Time to go." He took the Hyllion Bagia out of Brynn's lax fingers

and handed it to Jade. She stuffed it into her shirt, still staring with fascinated horror at the corpse on the floor.

Brynn wrenched free, frowning. "What's that noise?"

Jade's head snapped up. She waved them silent and they all heard the distant, rumbling, grinding noise. They could feel it through their feet, too. Jade sucked a quick breath and stepped around behind the open coffin lid. When she came back out, she was even paler. "This is the sarcophagus of Kahotep, Mehu's son. It says he's the protector of the Second Treasury of Mehu."

"Protector? How?" Brynn scoffed, poking at the half-decayed mummy with a toe. "He's dead."

Marcus bent down to inspect the body then straightened and nudged it aside with his foot. There, beneath, was a single square of limestone. It was a different size to the other floor-stones and it was now a good inch lower than them, too.

"A tripstone," Jade groaned. "I've set off some sort of boobytrap."

The grinding noise was louder now and they all looked apprehensively around. Phoenix stared at the ceiling, expecting it to be getting lower or something equally as nasty but nothing moved.

Understanding hit them all at once. Phoenix could see it on their faces.

"The door!" Jade's shout galvanised them. "I didn't wedge open *this* door!"

As one, the four companions raced back toward the entrance. Phoenix snatched up an ornate stool and carried it along. It was lighter than he'd expected. It couldn't be solid gold or he wouldn't have been able to lift it at all. Maybe it would work as a wedge, though.

"Hurry!" Jade and Marcus had their backs to the door and their hands against the frame, trying to stop it from sliding ponderously closed. The gap was less than two feet wide. There was no way both Phoenix and Brynn could make it through in time.

"Move!" Phoenix ordered Jade. She slipped through, leaving a space beneath Marcus. Phoenix shoved the stool into it. At least if it was partly open, they could work out a way to widen the gap. The stone shifted. Marcus let go, stumbling to land awkwardly beside Jade outside the chamber. The door slid quickly now. They watched as the stone slab touched the golden stool.

Phoenix hadn't counted on the age of the wood beneath the gleaming gold. The ancient timber crumbled like stale bread beneath the pressure of a tonne of stone. Gold flaked off and the wooden frame exploded into dust and wood slivers.

Desperately, he looked around for something more solid but the floor and walls were smooth. Together, they all hooked their fingers into the stone and heaved but for all their strength, the door was stronger. The gap closed a few more inches.

He heard Jade's anguished cry from the other side. "No!"

Finally, it ground to a halt, leaving just two inches of open space where the remains of the stool had been squashed into a hard, golden slab, preventing the door from closing.

There was a tense moment of eerie silence, broken only by harsh breathing, scrabbling and grunting as all four tried to haul the door back open. It didn't budge.

"Can you use the pressure pads again?" Phoenix called through the gap to Jade.

"We're trying," she wailed, "but we can't reach all three at once."

"Damn!" he thumped a hand against the uncaring stone. "Can you send some of your lights back through then? They all followed you. We're in the dark here."

"Sorry." Six little green fireballs squeezed through the opening and danced around Phoenix's head.

"What about Mjollnir?" Brynn's voice had a sharp edge to it.

"I can't risk bringing *this* ceiling down on us," Marcus' reply drifted through. "It might just collapse the whole pyramid as well."

“Good point,” Phoenix shot a quick look at the ceiling. Suddenly the load of rock overhead seemed a lot more oppressive than it had before, and those columns in the treasure room a lot less sturdy.

“Is there anything back in the treasure room you can use as a lever?” Jade suggested.

“We’ll go look but I doubt it,” Phoenix said pessimistically. “Hang on.”

Together, he and Brynn made a swift survey of the treasure chamber. Gold, silver, gems and wood were plentiful but strong iron bars were non-existent. Phoenix picked up a gilded chair and threw it angrily into a pile of treasure. The chair disintegrated and gold slithered to the floor in a shining cascade.

There was another subsonic rumbling beneath their feet. He exchanged worried looks with Brynn. Had they set off another trap? They sprinted back to the exit. As they neared the closed door, Phoenix could hear muffled shouting from the other side.

“Phoenix! Phoenix!” It was Jade’s frightened cry.

“We’re here. What’s happening?” Phoenix put one eye to the crack, trying to see beyond. Brynn squeezed in below. They could both see Jade’s lights spinning chaotically around in the dust-filled air. Dust filled? Why was it so thick with dust in there?

“The tunnel is filling up with sand!” Marcus yelled, coughing. “We’ve got to get the door open before we suffocate!”

“Where’s the sand coming from?” Phoenix rubbed his eye clear of grit and squinted through the gap again. “Which end of the tunnel?”

“Right here, by the door,” Jade sputtered. “It’s pouring in like a waterfall. My shield spell isn’t strong enough. I can’t hold it back. Hurry, we have to get the door open!”

Sand began trickling through the bottom part of the door; filling the space and making a small cone of sand on the inside.

“No! You two get out through Mehu’s tomb,” Phoenix thought fast. “We’ll find a way out through the pyramid.”

“What if there *isn’t* a way out. What if it’s been blocked up?” Jade’s voice rose.

“Then at least you two will be alive outside trying to find a way *in*,” he yelled back. He heard her coughing, angry refusal followed by the deeper murmur of Marcus’ voice then an ominous cracking and a loud *thump*.

“What was that?”

“The roof is caving in!” she screamed. The rush of sand increased to a dull roar.

“You can’t lose another life, Jade, and Marcus can’t lose any. We’ll be fine. Get out *now! Go!*” Phoenix ordered.

She made a wordless noise of frustration and fear and then he heard the faint sound of running footsteps. They were gone. Phoenix leaned his forehead against the cool stone and closed his eyes, listening to the gentle hiss of running sand.

“They’re gone,” Brynn said in an odd, strangled voice.

“They’ll find a way for us to get out,” Phoenix replied, trying to sound more confident than he felt. He still found it hard to rely on Jade. “But just in case they don’t, we’d better start looking.”

Instead, they both stood by the door awhile longer, listening in vain for the sound of returning footsteps. Finally, sand filled the two-inch gap in the door from floor to ceiling. There was no chance their friends could return to free them from that direction. Brynn and Phoenix stood for several minutes, staring down at the slow trickle of sand slipping through the space, before at last turning away.

They walked back into the vast treasure room in slow silence and gazed around blankly. The entire wealth of ancient Egypt didn’t seem all that important any more.

With just the two of them and only six dim little lights, the room felt a whole lot bigger and spookier – and darker. Phoenix frowned, blinking. Was it his imagination, or was it actually getting darker?

“Is it my imagination,” Brynn asked sharply, “or is it getting dark....oh.” One by one, Jade’s little green witch-lights faded into pinpoints and popped out of existence with a faint, *crack*.

Phoenix and Brynn were alone in the treasure-tomb of ancient mummies, in complete and utter blackness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Phoenix?” Brynn sounded a lot younger all of a sudden. His small hand crept into Phoenix’s and held on. Phoenix squeezed back and took a long, slow breath. His own heart raced at a million miles an hour; he strained to hear the slightest sound over the thumping of his own blood.

“It’s ok. We’re just stuck in a dark prison – again. What is this, the third or fourth time now?” He tried to make a joke of it and heard Brynn’s weak laugh. “We just need to keep our heads and think. What can we make light with?”

Brynn let go and Phoenix heard him scrabbling around on the ground at their feet. After a moment, there came a dull *clunk*. Brynn swore inventively but kept moving. Next the boy grunted in satisfaction and Phoenix heard a sharp, brittle sound like dry branches breaking, followed by a strange, hollow rattle.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

“You mean apart from cracking my shin on something hard?” the boy’s acid reply floated back. “I’m making a torch.”

Sparks jumped from Brynn’s flint, catching on the scraps of tinder cupped in his hand. He blew on them, the red flame a tiny dot in the vast, underground darkness. The flame jumped onto the torch he’d made and soon they had a new, smoky-red light to see by. He held the torch high, lighting another and passing it to Phoenix.

Phoenix gripped the smooth, rounded wood beneath his fingers, glad to have light again. Smooth, rounded wood? What the...? Turning his head, he looked at the object in his hand – and almost dropped it in shock.

“Brynn!” He yelped. “Is this Kahotep’s *leg bone* I’m holding?”

The boy held out his own torch and grinned. “I’ve got the other one, so at least we know he won’t follow us.”

Overcoming his squeamishness with difficulty, Phoenix turned towards the opposite end of the great hall, intending to seek an exit there.

This time, with a hoarse yell, he did drop the torch. It fell, smouldering, at the feet of the tall, black-robed, hooded figure that now stood in their path. Phoenix fell back a pace, drawing Blódbál and holding it ready before him. With a gasp, Brynn drew his own sword and held it out rather shakily.

A total of twenty robed figures now stood silently before them.

The leader stepped forward and pushed back the cowl of his robe to reveal a blank, golden mask. His bald head shone in the smoky red light. He lifted a thin, brown hand and pointed at Phoenix. The end of each finger was encased in a false, claw-like fingernail of gold. Intricate blue tattoos darkened the skin of his hand.

“Defilers of the royal tombs; robbers and thieves,” his deep voice sent shivers up Phoenix’s spine. “You have sealed your own fate by your actions. Take them.”

As one, the nineteen robed men stepped forward and threw back their hoods to expose masks of blood-red. Each held a short, sickle-shaped sword in one hand. Slowly, they advanced, moving to encircle the pair.

Brynn edged around so his back was against Phoenix’s, his bone-torch still flaring and flickering in one hand. Phoenix reached to unsling his shield from his back, only to remember that it had been lost in the collapse of Snefru’s offering chapel. He cursed and drew his dagger instead.

The pulse of Blódbál’s magic began to pound in his blood and roar in his ears. He could feel the sword’s thirst; its desire to take over and use his body to wreak havoc. He had to be careful. If he gave in to it with anger in his heart, he’d been warned that it would

turn him into a berserker and he would slaughter friend and foe alike without care. Phoenix clamped down on his own fear and anger holding it, like a caged animal, in his churning belly.

Closer and closer the hooded soldiers approached, their blades shining like blood in the flickering red light. The room's eerie silence was broken only by Phoenix and Brynn's harsh breathing, the soft rustle of cloth and the crackle of burning bone and linen. The acrid smell of burnt bone and dust made his eyes water.

Without warning, three of their attackers lunged at Phoenix. He parried two instinctively, spinning out of the way of the third. The harsh sound of metal-on-metal grated behind him and he knew Brynn was under attack, too. He was not the swordsman Marcus was and Phoenix knew it was only a matter of time before the boy fell under those lethal, curved Egyptian knives.

Desperately, Phoenix sprang forward, sliding the point of his sword deep into the chest of one man, yanking it back and turning quickly to slice another from shoulder to hip in one move. Both crumpled to the ground without a sound. The others closed the gap and kept coming, forcing Phoenix to retreat back towards Brynn again.

Turning, he flicked aside a sword aimed at his stomach and stuck out his dagger to deflect another. With a deft, backhanded stab, he took out one cowed figure. His dagger caught in the coarse linen robe and dragged at his arm as the man fell. Phoenix yanked it free, the tearing of cloth the only sound in the vaulted chamber. Rather than risk the same again, he jammed his knife back in its sheath and snatched up one of the Egyptian blades.

Phoenix risked a quick look behind. Wild-eyed, Brynn panted, his sword stained red. When Phoenix looked back, the golden-masked priest stood over his fallen comrades with his hands outstretched. As Phoenix watched, a flash of deep, blood-purple-blue leapt from those golden claws like dark lightning and earthed itself in their bodies. The two men stirred then, still without making a noise, climbed jerkily to their feet and picked up their weapons.

"Oh no," Phoenix muttered. "This is so not good."

"What?" Brynn hissed.

"The two I killed just came back to life."

Brynn gasped and Phoenix saw the torchlight quiver as though the hand that held it shook.

"We're going to have to cut our way through and make a run for it," Phoenix murmured from the side of his mouth, watching the dark soldiers. They had stopped attacking and were standing like statues awaiting orders.

"Whenever you're ready," Brynn replied, panting.

No point in waiting. Phoenix drew a deep breath. "*Now!*"

With a double war-cry the mismatched warriors leapt at their opponents. Brynn thrust the torch into the robes of one man, who staggered back, batting at the flaming cloth. Phoenix lay about him with grim determination as Blódbál sang its fierce song in his head. Slicing, dodging, parrying, thrusting, turning and chopping Phoenix cut his way through the enemy and broke free. Glancing back only long enough to see Brynn close on his heels, he ran toward the far wall, hoping escape lay in the murky distance.

Behind them, there was only unnatural silence and the flickering of burning cloth.

"There!" Brynn gasped, pointing with the torch at a rectangular, dark hole in the wall, half-hidden behind a pillar. Turning, they headed toward it without breaking stride.

As they reached it, Phoenix grabbed the door frame with the fingertips of his left hand and skidded around, looking back over his shoulder as he did. The masked soldiers were not following. They stood in a loose group around their leader, watching their prey escape.

Gulping air, Phoenix tried to stop his forward momentum long enough to wonder why but Brynn caromed into him. They both stumbled through the open doorway and into a corridor.

This one, however, wasn't empty. It was full of soldiers. Roman soldiers. Dozens of Roman soldiers. Before Phoenix and Brynn could react or even cry out thick, black cloths were flung over their heads. In a split second, they were both disarmed and bound in cloth and rope, their hands pinned neatly to their sides, heads completely covered – prisoners.

"Come on, Jade, we have to get out," Marcus urged her, pushing her before him away from the deepening pile of sand.

"We can't leave them." Glancing over her shoulder, Jade watched with despair as another chunk of limestone fell and was covered as still more golden sand showered down from above.

"You heard what Phoenix said. It makes sense. We can help them get out if we're alive. We can't if we're dead," Marcus insisted.

Jade growled in frustration then turned and fled up the rough corridor toward safety. Tears blurred her vision. She dashed them away and gripped her staff more tightly. She should have been able to do something. What was the point of being a Spellweaver if your spells weren't strong enough to save your friends?

It took only a minute to reach the end of the tunnel. There, they scrambled back up the steep, slippery slope to Mehu's tomb. At the top, Jade sent a guilty, relieved look at Marcus. He caught her eye in grave approval. The secret door back into the tomb had slid most of the way closed. Only the large piece of rock she had wedged into it prevented them from being trapped, too. Jade clenched her teeth. If only she'd thought to do the same at the other end.

Marcus gripped her shoulder and spun her to face him. She flinched away, feeling the burn from his iron gloves even through her clothes.

"Enough," he ordered. "I know what you're thinking and this is *not* your fault. None of us thought to prop the other door open. You cannot hold yourself responsible for everyone else's happiness and wellbeing, Jade – only your own."

She glared at him for a moment then closed her eyes. It was true. She *did* feel responsible; she did feel like she ought to be better at looking after people, pleasing and making them happy. Shaking herself, Jade tried to push aside her self-doubts. She gripped his arm.

"I... I'll try to remember. Let's go rescue Phoenix and Brynn."

Marcus nodded, apparently satisfied. He squeezed through the narrow gap, grunting as the stone scraped his chest and back. Jade eased through without difficulty and together they stood in Mehu's magnificent tomb once more.

Racing back to the exit, they found the horses still standing calmly at the broken entrance. The sandstorm was over. An eerie silence now blanketed the land, along with a fresh layer of golden sand.

"Let's leave the horses here for the time being," Jade suggested. "It's not far to the pyramid and they'll be safe here."

Marcus agreed and they left the tomb. Dusk was not far off. In the west, the sky was afire – alight with a breathtaking, brilliant, blood-red sunset. Jade stopped, stunned by the vision.

"The sunsets have been like this since Mount Vesuvius erupted a few months ago and buried Pompeii in its ash," Marcus said his eyes dark and solemn. "It always seems to bode ill." He shook his head as if to be rid of a bad memory and nodded toward the silhouette of the pyramid.

Side by side, they clambered out of the shallow wadi that housed the entrance to Mehu's tomb and jogged toward the towering step pyramid. In the failing light, they had to be careful. The area was strewn with ruined buildings, scattered stones and old foundations. It would be easy to break an ankle.

Finally they came out of the ruins and crossed a wide, level, open space on the south side of the pyramid. As they neared the base of the first giant stone step, Marcus gripped Jade's arm and pointed down. Close to where they stood, sand slowly slid into a long, shallow depression in the ground.

"This must be where the roof caved in," he said.

She inspected the solid stone wall before them. There was no sign of an entrance to the pyramid.

"We'll have to go around and see if the entrance is on the other side," she decided. As much as she hated to leave the place where Phoenix and Brynn were buried, there was no easy way in on this side. If there was a simple entrance, it would be a lot faster to use it than to try and break down the whole southern wall in an attempt to find a hidden one.

She followed Marcus around the eastern side of the pyramid, picking her way through the tumbled rocks and debris, glancing up to peer at the crumbling stone steps above in search an entrance. This place must be old to have fallen into complete ruin. So who was responsible for amassing all that treasure beneath such a decrepit old building complex? Why hide it here?

The last orange hints of sunset were fading quickly. The moon was yet to rise, so Jade blew life into three little witch-fires again and sent them bobbing ahead to light the way. They had to get Phoenix and Brynn out soon. Who knew what was happening down there. How much air did they have? How long would her lights last without her magic nearby? She really didn't like the idea of leaving her friends entombed with dozens of dead bodies and no light for a whole night. Jade shuddered at the thought.

A hand grabbed her shirt and she squeaked in alarm before realising it was Marcus. He dragged her down behind a low pile of stone rubble.

"What is it?"

"People – coming out of the pyramid," he hissed, peering around the stone. They had reached the northeastern corner of the pyramid, so he was looking at the northern face.

Jade doused her lights and waited for her eyes to adjust. She moved closer and followed suit. Sure enough, a dozen or more figures emerged from the side of the structure. Now that she was paying attention, she could hear rough, male voices in the distance. Her eyes widened as she caught a few words.

"It's Latin. They're Romans!" she gasped. "Roman soldiers, I think. Yes, one of them just said something about reporting to their centurion."

"Reporting what?" Marcus eased himself up, squinting to see through the gathering dusk.

"Reporting..." Jade listened hard with the aid of the *harken* spell, trying to ignore his harsh breathing and the scrape of her own boots on stone and sand. She groaned. "That they've captured two of the four people they were sent to find and they are taking them to see the Roman Proconsul's advisor in Memphis."

"Can you see if it's Phoenix and Brynn?" Marcus urged.

"Who else would they find in the pyramid?" she scoffed. At his steady look she peered around the corner again to check anyway. Briefly, the soldiers broke formation and she could see two dark shapes stumbling in the middle. One was tall, the other short but their heads were covered in some sort of black cloth. She quested along tendrils of the Binding Spell she had put on their little group so many days ago in England. Yes, she could sense both her friends.

Just as she was about to withdraw, another group emerged. The sight of them sent odd chills sleeting across her skin. Cloaked and hooded, they glided in eerie silence behind the soldiers. Narrowing her eyes, Jade could clearly see a pulsing, purple-blue aura of magic – especially around their leader. Whoever they were, they were not ordinary Roman soldiers.

Suddenly, the cloaked leader turned east and threw back his hood. She gasped at his blank, golden face and smooth head. Before she could put up mental shields, there was a faint push at the edges of her mind. She jerked back behind the dubious safety of the rock, heart pounding.

“We need to leave,” she grabbed Marcus’ arm.

“Why?” He twisted loose. “We’ve got to save Phoenix and Brynn.”

Jade sent a quick, scared look at the stone, imagining those cloaked figures coming closer. “Please, Marcus? It is Phoenix and Brynn but there’re some other men with them who are not just soldiers. They’re lead by a powerful sorcerer of some sort and I think he may have sensed me. We can’t take them on like this. There are too many and I’m not strong enough right now.”

Without further argument, Marcus stood and they began to retrace their steps. When they had made their way back to the cover of some ruins, Jade dared to light two small, dim witch-lights. Otherwise they were likely to trip and break something important. With every step the hairs on the back of her neck prickled in anticipation of discovery. Surely that gold-faced man had seen her; sensed her? Any second the soldiers would spring out of cover and surround them. She had expended too much energy on trying to stop the sandfall to be much use now. They had to get into hiding, regain strength and follow the soldiers back to Memphis from a distance.

It was their only chance to rescue Phoenix and Brynn.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Full night swept in across the dusty desert and with it the temperature plummeted. By the time they reached the horses, Jade shivered with cold and exhaustion. Inside the safety of the tomb, she dragged coats out of the Hyllion Bagia and they wrapped themselves gratefully in warm furs.

Marcus stood at the door, staring out into the star-strewn night. “We can’t stay here,” he finally said.

Jade agreed. “I know. The soldiers might find us. Besides, the horses need food and water and there’s nothing here. We’ll have to get to Memphis tonight and find somewhere to stay.” She shivered. Marcus stepped closer and put an extra fur around her.

“You need to rest and eat to replenish your strength. You’re no use to Phoenix and Brynn if you’re exhausted,” he ordered.

She leaned her head on his shoulder. “I wasted too much energy trying to stop the sand but I’ll make it to Memphis. I’ll use some of my herbs for energy. Sleep can wait. I just hope they’re ok.”

“How will we find them, though?”

“I can do a ‘*finna*’ spell on them,” she assured him. “It’s a variant on the water-finding one I did but it works on living things. I got it from that spell book.”

“But how will it find Phoenix and Brynn, not just any person?” Marcus seemed determined to iron out all the kinks before going into Memphis.

Jade frowned. “If I use it together with the Binding Spell I should be able to find Phoenix or Brynn fairly easily. I can sense them now but they’re travelling away from us and the connection is weakening.”

“Can you ride?”

“I’ll have to.” She tried to show a confidence she was far from feeling. “Let me just get something to eat as we go.” She fished out dried meat and handed some to Marcus. Next they tied the horses in a caravan and lead them out of the tomb.

As he mounted, Marcus looked over his shoulder at the step pyramid.

“One thing I don’t understand,” he murmured, “is how they found us – how they even knew to *look* for us here?”

Jade stared at him for a moment, horrible comprehension dawning. Feeling lightheaded, she clung to the saddle and gripped a fistful of her mare’s mane. Marcus kned his mount closer, grabbing her arm as she swayed. She gasped as Thor’s iron gloves burned her fair, elven skin. He snatched his hands away with an oath. Stripping off one glove, he renewed his grip as she swayed again.

“Marcus,” she groaned, “it’s my fault.”

“How?” his grasp tightened on her wrist.

“When we were in Asgard, on trial in Gladsheim, we saw Zhudai there, remember?”

“Of course,” he nodded, “but he escaped when Phoenix was fighting Loki.”

“But Zhudai saw *us*, too,” Jade pointed out. “Once he’d seen us, he could find us by Far-seeing. Remember? He knew you as the son of Governor Agricola in Engl...Albion but I put a protective spell on *you* when we were there so he couldn’t use his Farsight. I just didn’t think to put one on the rest of us after Asgard.”

Marcus gazed at her for a second before relaxing his fingers. The hard look on his handsome face softened and he smiled slightly. Letting go, he tucked the iron glove into his belt and regathered his reins.

"You're doing it again," he shook his head. She stared at him in confusion until he continued. "You're taking all the blame on yourself. We all knew what Zhudai could do once he'd seen us. None of us thought of it."

"But if I had done it and if I hadn't let Brynn talk me into exploring the tomb.." she began.

"But nothing," he gathered a fistful of her shirt and hauled her upright on her horse. "Stop getting stuck in self-blame and let's fix this. Short of tying him up, none of us could stop Brynn if he didn't want to be stopped. At least now we know how the Romans found us and you can put a stop to that."

He paused, frowning again. "You can put the spell on yourself, can't you?"

Jade nodded, wondering if she had the strength left at the moment. Closing her eyes, she spoke the spell but the surge of magic that accompanied it was weak at best. She slumped in the saddle, feeling Marcus prop her up again. Pressing her lips together, she kept her eyes closed and shook her head. "I can't. I'm just too tired."

"You *can*. You *have* to, Jade," he commanded.

"I *can't*," she hissed through gritted teeth, glaring at him. Tears started in her dust-filled eyes. He laid a hand on her arm again. She shook it off and turned away. "I'm just not strong enough. I'm not good enough. I.. I just can't." A salty drop ran down to her chin. She brushed it off impatiently.

There was a pause then Marcus' hand dropped onto her shoulder and squeezed. "Phoenix and Brynn are relying on us. If Zhudai sends his men after us and we are captured then we are all lost. You *must* protect yourself. You *can* do this. I have faith in you, Jade. For all our sakes, you will find the strength."

She clenched her teeth and swallowed hard, wanting to believe him; afraid to. He was right, though. She couldn't let Phoenix down now. There had to be a way. She'd let Phoenix and the others down once, in Svealand. She'd sworn she wouldn't let it happen again. Perhaps, it was time to borrow some strength.

Her hands shook as she fumbled in her pack. She drew out her herb-bag and pulled out a dried leaf of wolfsbane. It was a powerful plant she would normally hesitate to use but she was desperate.

Marcus' hand gripped her arm as she moved to touch it to her tongue. His eyes were grave.

"What is it?"

"Wolfsbane," she said defensively. "Aconite."

"That is poison! What will it do to you?" He didn't release her.

"Just increases my heartrate and energy levels temporarily." He didn't say anything, so she added. "It's not dangerous to *me* in small doses. I won't take much. I'm just so tired."

"You don't need it. You're strong enough without it," Marcus said levelly, his fingers still firmly restraining her.

"No," she argued. "I'm not. I need these herbs for my magic. You can't tell me to find the strength then stop me when I try. Let me go, Marcus. I know what I'm doing." Wrenching her arm free, she just touched the leaf to her tongue. Immediately, her heartrate increased, thumping irregularly against her ribs. Sweat beaded on her skin. She closed her eyes again and stilled her mind, blocking out everything except the need for the strength to perform this difficult spell. With the other hand she held the yin-yang amulet at her throat.

Deliberately summoning up her doubts and fears, she sought within herself to find what was weakening her. It couldn't just be a matter of missing the forests. Surely she wasn't that pathetic? Sinking into her own mind, she searched for the source of her

uncertainties and confronted it. Could it be just her own fear of failure; her fear of not being good enough? Were those worries holding her back, making her scared to try because she was afraid to fail; afraid to hear people she loved say she really was useless; not as smart as they thought she was? If so then she had to face the real Truth. Her fear could cause the only real failure – the worst one of all: the failure of *not* trying.

As if triggered by the realisation, a new strength and power flooded through her fingers from the amulet. Like a purple-blue flame it leapt, lighting her up inside like a torch. Opening her eyes, she uttered the incantation that would shield her from Zhudai's Sight. Comforting warmth and the bitter taste of wolfsbane surrounded and filled her whole body.

"Jade," Marcus sounded shocked. He stared at her. "Your...your eyes were *purple*."

The bitter taste subsided; leaving an inner heat that Jade hoped would never completely vanish. She smiled, feeling at peace with herself.

"I'm fine now." She assured him. "I've got all the power I need for now. We can go to Memphis and get the others tonight."

"But..." he protested.

"I can and I have to," she gave his words back to him. Without further discussion, she kicked her horse into motion and set off northeast, toward Memphis.

"Brynn? You ok?" Phoenix twisted around, struggling to pull his feet through his bound hands. He swore, angry that he hadn't anticipated the capture; angry that he hadn't been strong enough or quick enough to put up a good fight; angry that they'd been captured so easily. Most of all, he was angry that Blódbál had been taken. The sword had become an integral part of him. He felt lost and weakened without it.

It had been a long, rough trip. After the soldiers captured them, they had been force-marched through any number of twists and turns and up an endless flight of stairs into the open air. Then they had been dumped onto the back of a cart and hauled into what sounded like a large town. Phoenix assumed it was Memphis. He'd heard a couple of the soldiers planning a meeting with their centurion and with the Proconsul of Egypt's advisor in Memphis in the morning. After arriving, the bags were removed and their hands tied behind their backs. Thrown unceremoniously into a stone room, they were left lying on the floor.

The room was unlit but enough moonlight shone through a high, narrow window for Phoenix to see. Brynn lay on his side a few feet away, groaning – which probably meant he was alright. The boy had put up a decent fight every step of the way and got kicked several times for his troubles.

Phoenix finally managed to get his hands in front of his body and scrambled over to his friends' side. "You alright?"

He flipped Brynn onto his back and flinched at the sight of bruises and a black eye. The boy spat blood and struggled into a sitting position.

"I'm fine – mostly." With a grunt of pain, he folded himself up and jerked his feet through his arms so his hands were in front of him. Wiping his bloody nose and mouth on his sleeve, he squinted up at Phoenix. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere in Memphis, I think. I heard one of the soldiers mention the Temple of Set, so that's probably where we are. We're supposed to be brought before the Proconsul's advisor in the morning." Phoenix wrapped his bound wrists around his knees with a sigh. How the heck were they supposed to escape now? Where were Jade and Marcus? Had they been taken, too? So much for Jade's theory on taking opportunities. This one had sure backfired. Depression and fatigue seized him and he dropped his head onto his knees.

Brynn was silent awhile, rotating his neck and prodding himself apparently in search of more injuries.

"Sixth." His cryptic utterance broke the silence.

Phoenix stared at him, bewildered.

"This is the fourth time I've been imprisoned and the sixth time for you," the boy elaborated, his grin widening as he ticked them off on his fingers. "You were in the prison-tent in Agricola's camp and the cell in Gladsheim; we were both inside the Hyllion Bagia in the Dryad realm; in the hut in Olshammar; underneath the Step-pyramid and now this. Six."

Phoenix blinked in surprise, unable to stop the slow smile that crept across his mouth. The kid was irrepressible. He shook his head, chuckling.

"I'm not sure you can count the Bag as prison, since we were in there voluntarily - sort of; so we'll call it five-three."

"And we've got out each time, haven't we?"

"So far," Phoenix agreed.

"And we'll do it again, this time," Brynn shrugged, sounding confident.

"If you do," a plaintive voice interrupted, "would you kindly take me with you?"

Phoenix and Brynn gasped and twisted awkwardly toward the sound.

"Who's there?" Phoenix demanded.

Out of the shadows limped an elderly man, smiling at them in a tired, sad kind of way. His white hair and beard were matted and he wore a filthy Roman tunic and toga that might once have been white. His aged face showed traces of past happiness and blue eyes sparkled with keen intelligence from beneath bushy white brows.

"I am Heron," he bowed. "I come from Alexandria and I'd much rather be there than here." He waved a hand about. "Unfortunately I had a misunderstanding with the High-Priest of Set and he tossed me in here two weeks ago. At least, I think it was about two weeks ago. One loses track of time so easily in a dungeon, doesn't one? Hmm. That gives me an idea..." Pulling a small piece of white stone out of a hidden pocket, the old man sat down in a patch of moonlight and began to draw complex diagrams on the stone floor, muttering to himself from time to time.

The boys exchanged bemused looks. Brynn mouthed the word 'mad' to Phoenix, who smothered a laugh and nodded. Scrambling over, they peered at the drawings. Phoenix started as he recognised some of the images.

"That's a clock!" He blurted, pointing to a clear image of a clock-face, accompanied by some complicated sketches of a water-powered cog-and-gear wheel arrangement.

"A what, my boy?" Heron asked vaguely, continuing to draw.

"It's for telling time, isn't it?"

Heron looked up, surprise and disappointment on his face. "Why yes, have you seen one already then? Bother, I thought I'd come up with something new. Oh well." With a sigh of regret, he used a grubby corner of his robe to erase the images, leaving a white smear on the dark stone.

Phoenix winced, feeling sorry for the old guy. He probably *had* just invented something new to this world but Phoenix had ruined it by recognising it from his own. Regretting his outburst, he sat down cross-legged next to the older man.

"So what was your misunderstanding with the High Priest about?" He asked, more to be polite than out of interest.

Heron dusted off his fingers. "I merely showed him plans for my new machine for dispensing holy-water to Christians and the man took mighty offence to it. It seems he dislikes Romans, Christians and machines of any sort. So he threw me in here for a month. Quite frankly, though, I've had enough of the food here and I'd like to go home to Alexandria now."

Phoenix suppressed a smile. It was hard not to like the guy, mad or not. "What were you doing in Memphis, anyway?"

Heron turned to him eagerly, rubbing chalky hands together. “Ah, that’s a fascinating tale. I was here to investigate rumours that the Phoenix is about to arrive.”

“*What?*” “The *what?*” Brynn and Phoenix both spoke at the same time.

Heron didn’t seem to think their astonishment at all unusual. He merely nodded and smiled in apparent delight. “Yes, yes. Wonderful news isn’t it? Let me tell you how I discovered it, but first let me get you out of those ropes.”

The old man drew a broken stone out from under his robe, talking as he proceeded to saw through their bonds, oblivious to their dumbfounded gazes.

“It seems the Egyptian people believe that, once every five hundred years, the Phoenix bird will return to Egypt. It will carry the ashes of its dead father in an egg made of myrrh - which it will offer at the temple of the Sun god, Ra. Then it will build a nest and burn itself up. As the bird and nest burn, a new baby bird will emerge from the ashes.”

Heron turned to cut Brynn’s ropes. “Of course, Phoenix is a Greek name. The Egyptians call it the Bennu bird and use it to symbolise Ra. Anyway, it’s also linked to rebirth and life through the inundation flood of the Nile and that’s why I’m researching it.”

Phoenix rubbed his wrists, feeling a little overwhelmed. “Errr... and the flood is so important because...?”

Heron raised his brows. “Dear boy, where have you been? The Nile hasn’t flooded for three years. The peasants are starving. I heard rumours amongst the peasants that the Phoenix was due and had been seen near here. I came here hoping to bring good news back to the Proconsul to say that the flood would come this year.” He sat with his back against the wall. “Unfortunately, it appears they were just rumours. The Phoenix has not yet returned to restore balance and harmony to the land.”

Phoenix jumped. The Phoenix of this legend was meant to somehow restore harmony to the land of Egypt? Why did that sound familiar? What was it the Druids had said in England? He searched his memory. Yes - that sending the Jewel of Asgard back to Thor would restore the balance of power in their land. Then it had turned out that Truda, who was the Jewel, had been needed in her role as a goddess of spring to restore the balance of the seasons to the land of Midgard. Was it all connected somehow?

Frowning, Phoenix struggled to tie the threads together. Was he on to something with this? After all, the amulets that had drawn him and Jade into this game were the very symbols of balance and harmony – yin-yang. Could it be that, in each level of the game, their *true* goal was to provide that balance? Was there more to this game than just heroic kill or be killed, as Jade had said?

CHAPTER NINE

“Heron!” Phoenix interrupted the old man’s verbal wanderings.

“Yes, son?”

“What does the goddess Anuket do?” Phoenix leaned forward staring intently through the half-light. Behind him Brynn caught his breath.

Heron tugged on his beard. “Well, I’m no expert in Egyptian gods, you understand but I *think* Anuket is the daughter of Ra. I believe she’s associated with childbirth and is responsible for the fertility of the fields through the flooding of the Nile each year. Hmm, just like the Phoenix bird,” he seemed surprised, “that’s a co-incidence, isn’t it? Why do you ask about her?”

“Oh, nothing,” Phoenix murmured.

There *had* to be a link. In each level of the game so far, they had been needed to somehow restore the balance of power or the balance of nature. Here they were to free Anuket and the river hadn’t flooded for three years. In each level they gained what they needed to do the same in the next level. It all fit too neatly to be wrong! Elated with his discovery, he could barely stop himself from grinning like an idiot. Brynn must have noticed something, because he raised an eyebrow at him in silent query. Phoenix shook his head and mouthed, ‘later’. The boy nodded, yawning.

“What about the god, Set?” Phoenix wanted to know how they had come to be thrown into the temple of that particular god.

Heron wagged a finger and shook his head. “Ah, now he’s a nasty one, is old Set. He represents everything that threatens the harmony of Egypt. He is the god of disease, violence and chaos. Most unpleasant.”

Phoenix and Brynn looked at each other and spoke in unison, “Just like Loki.”

The old man continued with a sigh, unheeding. “I should have known better than to ask *his* High Priest for information on the Phoenix bird, even if he is the Proconsul’s advisor. You see, Set is also the god of the desert and storms and,” he stared off into space, looking bemused, “foreigners, for some strange reason. Anyway, that makes him the antithesis of both Anuket and the Phoenix. I really should have known better.”

Brynn slapped his forehead with his hand. “The illusion spell. Jade didn’t put one on us after Asgard.”

Phoenix groaned as all the dots were connected. Now he understood how the priests of Set had known to find them. Zhudai was friends with Loki and Loki was, more than likely, just another name for Set – or his friend, anyway. Once Zhudai had farseen their location it had to be a simple matter to get Set’s minions onto them.

“And” he said aloud, “if Set is the god of desert storms that explains that sudden sandstorm. It kept us pinned down long enough for his priest to track us down. Man, how dumb can we be? We walked right into their arms. Jade was right, each choice does have consequences.”

“Who are these people?” Heron asked, looking at Phoenix. “Is Loki your name perhaps?”

“What? No, no. I’m Ph.....Drake,” Phoenix amended, hoping Brynn would catch on. The boy didn’t bat an eye, introduced himself with his own name and never forgot to call Phoenix, ‘Drake’. Phoenix sent him a grateful smile. He wasn’t sure what had prompted him to go under his middle name. He just didn’t want Heron blurting out his name to all and sundry with that legend so fresh in his mind. There was enough pressure on him as it was. If the Nile flooded after they released Anuket, that was great but he didn’t need the hopes of an entire nation riding on him as well.

Phoenix was lost in thought, ignoring Heron's rambling conversations with Brynn. He prowled around the cell for awhile, checking the door and tiny window just in case someone had accidentally left a key in the lock or loosened the mortar or something. No luck. In the back of his mind was the knowledge that, whatever the reason, they were on a deadline to release Anuket before the death of the moon - but they still didn't know when that was.

After pacing awhile longer, he decided sleep was his only option. After all, there wasn't much they could do until Marcus and Jade caught up with them - assuming they'd been somewhere around when the Romans were bringing them out of the pyramid.

If Jade and Marcus didn't turn up before dawn, he'd think about escaping. He laid his head on his arm and closed his eyes, hoping Heron would stop talking soon. Unconsciously, he reached for Blódbál's hilt, feeling its absence like a sharp ache in his gut. He had to get that sword back. Without it he just wasn't good enough or strong enough to get through the rest of this game.

Heron rubbed his face and lay down. "Unfortunately, when I get back and tell him the news, Proconsul Priscus will be most unhappy. This is such a bad time to make him mad. I daresay I'll just be thrown into jail again."

Almost hating to ask, Phoenix prompted him without opening his eyes. "So why is this a bad time to give the Proconsul bad news?"

"You have been a long time way from Egypt, haven't you, my boy?" their fellow prisoner chuckled. "Emperor Titus wishes to open the Flavian Amphitheatre in Rome with a hundred days of Games. Poor Priscus is tasked with providing enough wild animals, slaves and trained gladiators for the Games. With the countryside here so starved and half the animals and people dead in from the anthrax plague that swept through the Empire earlier this year, he's having trouble filling the quota."

"So he's not going to want to hear that the Phoenix isn't coming to help the Nile flood?" Brynn guessed.

"No indeed," Heron confirmed, "and if you two don't get out of here, you can be quite sure you'll end up as slaves or gladiators in the Games."

"OK," Phoenix sat up, no longer sleepy, "I think it's time to leave."

"And you'll take me with you?" Heron begged.

Phoenix nodded, thinking hard. Something nagged at him. He remembered. "If you're not an expert in Egyptian gods," he said, "how did you know so much about Anuket?"

Heron blinked at him. "Well, there's one of those obelisk things devoted to her right outside my house in Alexandria."

Phoenix grinned and stuck out his hand. "Of course we'll take you with us. In fact, we'll deliver you home ourselves. I don't suppose you know when the 'death of the moon' is?"

Heron shook Phoenix's hand, looking grateful but slightly bemused. "My dear boy, I don't even know what day it is today. I suppose the death of the moon, if you consider it by Egyptian standards, would be any day now - the first night of the last quarter."

"Thought it might be. Damn," Phoenix frowned. "We need to get out of here. Now."

"This is it," Jade whispered, pointing at the vast building ahead. She and Marcus were crouched in the shadows of an archway, observing the Temple of Set from across a moonlit square.

Earlier, they had crept into Memphis and found a quiet inn. There Jade fed and watered the horses and managed to wash the worst of the sand and grit from her face and hair. Marcus bartered for some less conspicuous clothing and negotiating lodgings for the night. Now both wore loose, dark-dyed long linen tunics. Jade wound a dark cloth around her bright hair and pointed ears. Using rags from the inn kitchen, they muffled the hooves

of the horses. Dirt from the stables darkened the hide of the white pony. It was difficult to sneak while leading horses around but they couldn't afford to leave them behind if a quick getaway was necessary. Jade had a feeling they wouldn't get to make use of the beds they'd paid for.

Then they slipped out of the inn without telling the innkeeper and found a sheltered place for Jade to perform her *finna* spell. The new strength she had found served her well. It took only moments for the spell to draw her in the right direction through the twisted back streets of Memphis.

Past enormous stone temples, silent statues of sphinxes and strange gods; past fragrant gardens and ancient palaces; past new Greek and Roman temples and the sunbaked, mudbrick houses of the Egyptian people; deep into the city they moved.

There, in the centre of the most squalid, poorest section of the old town, they found the imposing Temple of Set. Across the front, flaming torches sat in sconces on each smooth column, lighting the entrance in an unforgiving glare. Four robed, hooded figures guarded the doorway. Sickle-shaped knives gleamed as they moved. There was no hope of entering that way.

After a whispered conference, Marcus and Jade wound their way through the maze-like slums surrounding the temple. Twice Marcus had to draw his sword to fend off would-be pickpockets, lurking in the shadows. Once Jade was obliged to use her quarterstaff to discourage a thief who leapt at her. It took almost half an hour but eventually they found their way, unobserved by the guards, into an alley that ran directly beside the temple. The moon rose, so they doused the torches and picked their way along the stinking, garbage-strewn street, toward the back of the building.

Jade held up her hand and their little caravan stopped. Closing her eyes, she pressed the palm of her left hand to her forehead and whispered *finna*, concentrating hard on Phoenix. A sharp picture swam into her head. He was very close but somewhere almost-dark and quite silent. A prison, most likely. There was a faint light – moonlight perhaps. A window? Opening her eyes, Jade looked hard at the high, stone wall of the temple. There. Just above ground level was a narrow window. Phoenix and Brynn were behind it.

Making sure no-one approached, she handed her reins to Marcus and crouched beside the window, peering into the gloom.

"Phoenix!" she hissed. "Brynn!" It was too dark inside to see anything. Misgivings seized her. What if she was wrong and this was the bedroom of the high priest or something? She was about to draw back when a scuffling noise caught her ear. Brynn's sharp little features appeared in the gap. He grinned at her shocked gasp.

"Hey. What took you so long?" he demanded.

"Brynn! Are you alright? Where's Phoenix?" She was so relieved she didn't even bother to get annoyed at his pert comment.

"Here!" came a grunt from somewhere below Brynn. The boy pointed straight down.

"He's holding me up. So, got a plan for getting us out of here?"

"It depends on how much of the temple you saw as you were brought in," Jade countered.

Brynn grimaced. "None. They had our heads covered."

"OK," she bit her lip. "In that case, no, I don't have a plan. But we'll think of something."

"Better be soon," he warned. "It'll be dawn in a few hours and we're supposed to go before the Proconsul's advisor then. Heron thinks we'll be made slaves or gladiators for the Games in Rome."

"Who's Heron?" she asked, distracted.

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Cell-mate. We're taking him with us."

“What? Why?”

“Long story. Whoa!” He looked alarmed and swayed back and forward. Glaring down, he hissed at Phoenix, who growled something at him, “Hold still! Alright, alright, I’ll tell her. Phoenix says to call him ‘Drake’, to tell you he’s not leaving without Blódbál; Heron thinks the ‘death of the moon’ is any night now...oh... and that the High Priest has the ability to bring his dead monk-soldiers back to life.” Brynn repeated dutifully.

“Oh my...” Jade breathed in horror. Shaking her head, she refocused her thoughts. Eyeing the window, she dismissed it as an escape route – far too narrow, even for Brynn’s skinny, ten year old body. “Give us a few minutes to think of something. Tell Phoenix..er...Drake.. and your friend to be ready to take advantage of any opportunity to get out. Use the old ‘sick prisoner’ routine or something.”

Standing, she brought Marcus up to speed. “We have to think of something,” she whispered. “There has to be a way to get inside, find them and Phoenix’s stupid sword and get out. We’ve been around the whole building and I’ve only seen one entrance – the front door.”

Marcus frowned. “Perhaps if you could distract the guards, I can slip past. Then I can find my way to their cell while you find the High Priest and wait for us to join you. The High Priest is most likely to have charge of a magical weapon – especially if he’s a sorcerer as you said. We’ll probably have to kill him to get Blódbál,” he finished grimly.

“How am I supposed to distract the guards and find the High Priest?” Jade demanded.

He tilted his head and looked at her, narrow-eyed. “Take off your clothes.”

“What!?” She yelled in a whisper.

Marcus shook his head. “You can wear my tunic. With a belt and some of the jewellery Brynn stole, you’ll look like a concubine or slave. No man on earth will ignore you, believe me,” he said with wry humour.

Jade flushed, hoping he couldn’t see the colour in the pale moonlight. When this whole adventure had started, she had been determined that her avatar would be as beautiful as her real self was plain in the real world. A lucky roll of the dice had given her seventeen year old character extraordinary beauty but she’d almost forgotten it in the frenzy of recent days. Now, the thought of it made her uncomfortable. She had no idea how to act like a concubine and she said as much to Marcus.

His mouth twisted. “You don’t need to. Just go up to the door and make up some story about being sent by the Proconsul or something. All you need to do is get inside and I’ll slip in and find the others.”

“Why can’t I just use a *command* spell and put the guards to sleep? Or maybe you could shoot them with your bow.”

He considered it. “I couldn’t kill more than two before they raised the alarm. Your spell is worth a try but you have to be pretty close to cast it, don’t you? We can’t *get* close to them without being seen. What if they *are* some sort of undead and it doesn’t work? Besides, if the High Priest really is a sorcerer, you’re going to need all your strength to fight him.”

Jade frowned. “Why can’t *you* wear the stupid tunic and jewellery?”

Marcus sent her a wry, half-amused smile. “Somehow I don’t think it would have quite the same effect.”

She hunched a shoulder at him and chewed on her lip, undecided. It was a very, very dodgy plan but she couldn’t come up with anything better. When had Marcus taken charge? Reluctantly she nodded. He pulled the tunic out of his gear bag and handed it to her. Jade took it without enthusiasm, went around the other side of the horses and changed. When she was ready, Marcus inspected the result.

“You’ll have to take your boots off – and leave your staff with me. Here, hold still so I don’t hurt you with these damned gloves.” With an expression of intense concentration, he produced several, glittering objects and began to put them on her. Jade held still as he draped an ornate, chain headdress over her hair. Then he handed her some bejewelled rings and bracelets, while he clasped a heavy golden torc around her neck and a thick, filigree chain around her waist.

Standing back, he looked at her again then shook his head. “Something’s missing. Ah! Wait a moment.” He dived into the shadows of a tumbled-down shack and emerged carrying something small and dark. “Charcoal. Egyptian women always put kohl on their eyes but this will have to do. Just don’t rub your eyes. Hold still and close your eyes.” Cursing her Elven heritage, he stripped off his gloves and tucked them into his belt while he worked on her eyes.

Jade did as she was told but her mouth was dry at the thought of what she was about to attempt. Her thirteen year old self was a tomboy. She had only a vague idea of how to flirt and act girly from watching her older sisters in the real world, and her character had lead pretty sheltered life in the forest with her mother. What if she wasn’t able to carry it off? Even worse, what would happen if the priest took a fancy to her?

“Can I take my knife at least?” She murmured, opening her eyes as Marcus finished and pulled on his gloves again.

“Definitely,” he nodded, looking grim. “Strap it onto your leg, under the tunic.”

She did so, feeling much safer. Squaring her shoulders, she closed her eyes for a second and took a deep breath.

“OK. Let’s go now before I stop and think about this too much.”

CHAPTER TEN

“She said to take any opportunity to escape and to use the ‘sick prisoner’ routine,” Brynn repeated. “What’s that?”

Phoenix blinked at him. It was hard to imagine anyone not knowing the oldest escape idea in the book. Maybe that was a good thing. He turned to Heron, who was watching them both eagerly.

“Have you heard of the ‘sick prisoner’ escape routine?”

Heron shook his head, looking bewildered.

“Well,” Phoenix stared at the thick wooden door, “let’s hope the guards haven’t either. Heron, give me that piece of sharp stone you had. Here’s how it goes...”

Jade took a deep breath and stepped out of the shadows. Calling up a mental image of her oldest sister, she put a hand on her hip and let her eyelids droop. With her hips swaying as she walked, she put her bare feet carefully down on the grimy stones in front of the temple. As she climbed the first two, the four guards moved together, blocking her way to the door.

She tried to make her voice all deep and throaty; hoping it wouldn’t come out as a nervous squeak. “Good evening gentlemen. I’ve been sent by the Proconsul.” Tilting her head, she looked up at them from under her lashes and smiled.

“We don’t need you, wench,” one of the guards said in a harsh voice.

She went up two more risers and put her hand on her leg, sliding the tunic up a little – and, incidentally, gripping the handle of her knife. She felt ridiculous and had to suppress an urge to giggle at her own actions.

“*You* may not,” she smiled slowly and heard at least one of the men give a strangled gasp. Maybe she was getting the hang of this. “But the Proconsul seems to think the High Priest does. He’s expecting me, you know, and if I don’t arrive soon, I think he might be just a little upset, don’t you?” Batting her eyelashes, she poked out her lower lip then wondered if she’d overdone it when all four guards took a half-pace toward her.

Behind them, a shadow slipped between the columns.

“You three stay here,” one of the hooded men ordered after a long, thoughtful pause. “I’ll take her to the High Priest, just in case. Come on woman.” He waved a hand at her.

Jade let out a long, slow breath and hurried up the rest of the stairs.

At the door, the monk gave an odd series of knocks and a small door set into the larger panel swung open a few feet. Jade followed the guard inside, waiting in a huge, shadowed antechamber while he spoke softly to the doorkeeper. At the back of the chamber, an enormous statue of Set towered ominously overhead. Jade looked up the glossy, black legs, past the short, stone tunic to the enormous, curved, beak-like face of the deity. She shivered. Whatever Set was the god of, it was not anything nice.

The guard appeared at her side, giving the statue no more than a casual glance. Glad to leave the foyer, she obeyed his abrupt gesture and trailed along behind him, into the dark halls of Set’s temple.

Behind her, just before the door creaked closed, another shadow drifted inside. After the heavy thud of wood closing, there was a gasp from the doorkeeper. Next came a short, wet noise then silence followed by the rustling of cloth and a scraping sound – as though something heavy was being dragged across a stone floor. Jade kept a straight face, resisting the temptation to look around and check to see if Marcus was ok.

As they wound their way deeper and higher into the temple, Jade began to feel profoundly uneasy. The further she went, the greater the distance between her and her friends became. A dagger, her wits and some minor magic were poor weapons indeed against a sorcerer who could raise the dead. Why on earth had she let Marcus talk her into this?

This whole creepy place reeked of unholy death and danger. The stone walls were darkened with soot and the occasional, smoky torch did little more than highlight the blackness between. In the distance, a strange, inharmonious chanting began and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. A faint, terrified scream made her shiver and she jumped as a deep gong reverberated through the building once, twice, three times.

Still, the silent guard glided before her, now leading the way toward a narrow, spiralling staircase.

“Up there,” he jerked his head toward the stairs.

“Aren’t you coming with me?” Jade glanced up the risers.

He laughed unpleasantly and she wished she could see his face beneath the hood. “This is as close as I have to get to the High Priest, thank goodness. Good luck girl, you’ll need it.”

Aware that the guard was watching, she reluctantly put her foot on the first step and began to move upward. She really, really didn’t want to go up. Blast Phoenix and his stupid sword. Surely he could get by without it if he really had to. He’d managed ok on the first level of the game. Another of her lives wasn’t worth giving up for one blasted magic sword.

Just as she had decided to retreat and help Marcus instead, the faint sound of angry shouting reached her ears. Since her hearing was better than the guards’, Jade had several seconds to think and act before he did.

Swiftly she spun to face him, sliding her ruby-hilted knife out of its sheath and up behind her back. With a slow smile she swayed back down the stairs, intending to knock him out if she could. She didn’t enjoy killing people, even if they were digital. First, however, it was time to find out if her command spell would work.

“Help! Help! Guard! This man is sick,” Brynn shouted, thumping on the cell door. “Help!”

There was a brief pause. Brynn glanced up at Phoenix, who nodded. The boy shrugged and yelled again. Heron lay on the ground near the door, groaning enthusiastically. Phoenix closed his eyes. The old man would give them away through sheer overacting at this rate.

“Get back from the door, boy!” A rough voice called from outside. Brynn moved over to Heron’s side, trying to look anxious. “Where’s the other prisoner,” the guard demanded.

Brynn pointed. “He’s not well either but he’s sleeping.”

In one shadowy corner, they had piled up filthy straw into a human-shaped mound and draped most of Phoenix’s clothing over it. This was the one weak point in their plan. If the guard had even half a brain cell he would guess it was a ruse and leave. Phoenix held his breath, his fingers digging into stone as he supported himself.

Brynn knelt beside Heron and stroked the old man’s white head. Heron chose that moment to give his best performance, yelping a realistic cry of pain before clutching at his stomach and groaning again. Convinced, the guard pushed the door open and hurried in.

Phoenix leapt. He had been crouched, cat-like, on top of the doorframe, braced against the ceiling. Now he flung himself onto the guard, wrapping one arm around his throat in a choke-hold and locking it on. As the monk staggered, flailed and gasped in

Phoenix's hold, Brynn snatched the man's curved dagger and short sword. Dashing to the door, the boy checked and nodded the all-clear.

Within seconds the guard was unconscious. Phoenix stripped off the hooded robe and bound him with scraps of rope lying on the prison floor. Stuffing a handful of straw into his mouth, he rolled the man into a dark corner and grabbed up his own clothes.

"Here," he shoved the robe at Heron, "put this on over your clothes and lead the way. Nice bit of acting, by the way."

Behind Heron's back, Brynn grinned and held up the strands of white hair he had yanked out to help the old man's performance. Phoenix had to press his lips together to stop himself laughing.

"Oh dear," Heron rubbed the back of his head. "I don't really remember the way out very well."

"How about the way to the High Priest?" Phoenix slipped into his shirt. "I want my sword back. Brynn, give me that one," he held out his hand and the boy slapped the hilt of the guard's sword into it. Hefting the weapon, Phoenix screwed up his nose. It felt heavy and lifeless. Better than nothing.

"Let's go," he ordered.

With stealthy steps, he and Brynn followed the old man down countless halls, half-lit by smoky torches in wall-brackets. Somewhere in the distance, a weird, unearthly chanting began, followed by a hair-raising scream. A gong sounded three times.

Feeling edgy, Phoenix urged Heron to move faster. The old man waved him silent. He muttered to himself, pointing down each corridor, shaking his head and moving on. Just as Phoenix became certain Heron was lost, a lone monk appeared at the end of the hall, moving swiftly toward them. With a gasp, Heron jumped aside, giving the game away before anyone could stop him. Phoenix ran forward, sword swinging down at the monk's head.

In a flash the man raised his own weapon and the clash of steel resounded in the narrow hall. Brynn darted in, slicing with the curved dagger, only to have the blade turned aside by a neatly counterthrust dagger. Phoenix skipped back, raising his blade to strike again.

"Wait!" A deep, familiar voice stopped him in mid-thrust. The monk flipped his hood back with an iron-gloved hand. Dark eyes glittered above a fierce, white smile.

"Marcus? Good to see you." Phoenix lowered his sword and reached out to thump his friend on the arm. "Sorry about attacking you, by the way. Nice reflexes. I would have had you, though."

"One day we'll have time to see who's the better swordsman," the Roman bowed his head, "but right now we need to find Jade."

"She's not with you?" Brynn peered around as though he'd somehow overlooked her.

"I came to find you; she went to look for your sword," Marcus sent Phoenix a solemn look.

Phoenix let a twinge of guilt slide away. She needn't have taken such a risk. They could have gone together. He waved Marcus on ahead.

"You lead, we'll follow and Heron can bring up the rear like we're your prisoners. Brynn, hide the knife," he ordered, twisting his own blade up behind his back. The others fell into line and they retraced Marcus' steps toward the front entrance.

Outside the gloomy antechamber they held a whispered conference. Marcus and Heron agreed on the direction to the High Priest's rooms and they stole through the foyer. They had just entered a long hall that they hoped would lead to the High Priest's chambers when a loud cry sounded from behind.

"I think they found the guard we trussed up," Phoenix murmured.

Marcus shook his head. "More likely the doorkeeper I killed."

Phoenix swore. "I was hoping to slip out without having to fight our way."

"Ah well," Brynn whispered. "It's been..oh... at least seven hours since our last fight to the death with something supernatural."

"Are you counting them now, too?" Phoenix was amused in spite of their dire situation.

Brynn chuckled. "I have to have something to tell my grandchildren – assuming I live that long."

Behind, the outcry escalated and soon came the sound of an alarm gong, followed by running feet. Heron hesitated at a junction, looking both ways in confusion. Brynn almost danced with impatience right behind him. Phoenix and Marcus turned to check for pursuers but the hall behind was clear so far.

"I don't know which way it is," Heron whispered. Together, they peered down both passages, hoping for inspiration.

From the left-hand corridor came the sound of manic, insane laughter, suddenly silenced. The four exchanged puzzled glances.

"That was weird," Phoenix remarked. "Weirder than usual, I mean."

"I think I hear someone running," Brynn waved him silent. "Hide." They pressed themselves against a wall. Phoenix reached up, grabbed the torch over his head and extinguished it by turning it upside down on the floor. They were plunged into near-blackness, with only the sound of their own breathing and the distant alarm cries.

Moments later a slender, white-clad body came hurtling down the left corridor, skidding to a halt at the junction.

"Jade!" Marcus stepped out of the gloom, flipping his hood back.

She started violently and then grabbed his arm, gasping for breath. "Did you get them out?"

"We're here," Phoenix assured her, blinking at the bizarre getup she wore. Exotic gold jewellery dripped off her and she was showing a lot more leg than usual. "Is that Marcus' tunic?"

"And my treasure!" Brynn pointed indignantly at the kings' ransom worth of gold around her neck and arms.

"We don't have time for that now," Jade panted. "The High Priest's chamber is at the top of a tower back that way and the guard I knocked out will be found any second. If you want your sword, we have to get it *now*."

Phoenix shook himself and nodded for her to lead the way.

She turned back and led the way down a long, twisted hall. "Did you bring my staff, Marcus?"

The Roman shook his head. "It's difficult to sneak when you're carrying a big stick."

Jade sent him a humourless look and took a tighter grip on her dagger. "Well, I've found out that my magic works on at least some of the guards."

"Good," Phoenix approved.

"Magic?" Heron's voice was far too loud and the others shushed him. "You can perform magic young lady? Can you show me some?" He sounded as excited as a little kid.

Jade sent first Heron then Phoenix an incredulous look, as if to say 'where did you get this guy? Is he insane?' Phoenix shrugged. There wasn't really time to explain why they were dragging an old man around with them.

"Is it ok if we wait until *after* we get out of this place before I start performing tricks?" she said sarcastically.

"Of course, of course," Heron agreed, bowing his head. "I'm so sorry. I do tend to get carried away when I find something new and interesting to learn about. Last time it was

when my friend's house caught fire and I designed a machine to help put out fires – unfortunately, I was so busy thinking about it that I forgot to help Augustus and his house burned down.” He sighed.

Brynn stifled a giggle and the desperate mood lightened.

“Here it is,” Jade pointed at a narrow, twisting staircase that seemed to lead into a tower. Nearby, the slumped figure of a guard-monk lay sprawled on the floor.

“Nice,” Phoenix grinned. “What spell worked on him, the old *sleep* command spell, I suppose?”

Jade flushed and shook her head. “I tried but he resisted it, so I switched it to *laugh* and that distracted him long enough so I could thump him on the head with my dagger.”

Phoenix stared at her, remembering that instant of odd laughter before. Struggling to keep a straight face of his own, he nodded. “Interesting choice.”

She sent him an exasperated look. “If you want your dumb sword back, we need to come up with a plan and quickly. I hear guards coming from both directions.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Right,” Phoenix focussed his thoughts. “How about we go up and attack as soon as we get in. Then, when we get Blódbál back, we’ll be able to fight our way out of the temple.”

Jade gazed at him and shook her head. “That’s one of the things I like about you – always thinking with your sword arm. Shouldn’t we at least make sure the sword is there before we kill anybody to get it?”

“Fine. Whatever,” he retorted. “So have you got a better plan? I just want my sword back.”

“What is it with you and that thing?” Jade sent him a worried look beneath her lashes. “It’s like you’re addicted to it or something.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Phoenix shrugged her words away, irritated.

Marcus stepped between them, frowning. “Remember – we’re a team. We need to make the most of everyone’s skills.” He sent Phoenix a warning glance, reminding him of their conversations about this very topic – and what it takes to be a leader.

Guiltily, Phoenix remembered his own recent resolve to be more patient and co-operative. From the expression on Jade’s face, she was thinking along similar lines. She gave him an apologetic half-shrug and Phoenix nodded back, feeling the irritation slip away. Marcus was right.

“OK,” Jade whispered, looking over her shoulder down the hall. “How about this? Marcus & Heron go up first, since they are already dressed as monks. They get in using some excuse about the prisoners escaping. Then..”

“Then they signal us when they’ve spotted Blódbál?” Phoenix put in.

“Right,” she agreed. “Once we know it’s there, we three will attack while Brynn steals it and Heron keeps an eye out for guards.”

“Oh dear,” Heron moaned. “Perhaps I should have just stayed in that cell.”

Brynn thumped the old man on the back and grinned. “Nah. You don’t want to miss the fun!”

As the sound of running feet grew louder, the five stole up the narrow stairs toward the High Priests’ chamber. At the top was a thick door of dark wood. Jade tugged on Marcus’ arm as he reached up to knock.

“Use the knock they used on the front door. Maybe it’s the secret knock for the day or something.”

He hesitated then knocked in an odd sequence. Phoenix glanced at the hinges on the door and realised it must open inwards – which meant he, Brynn and Jade would be visible to whomever opened it. He waved the other two back down the stairs until they were hidden by the curve of the stone wall. Jade followed his lead but lay down on the steps and inched forward so she could see what was happening.

Phoenix clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. She was so darned stubborn – always sure she knew what the right thing to do was. Deliberately, he let the feeling go and reminded himself that she was usually correct. He didn’t have to like it but he’d be stupid to try and stop her. She must have a good reason.

With a loud creak, the door above swung open, sending warm, bright light cascading down the stairwell. Phoenix and Brynn pressed themselves against the wall, holding their breath. Jade, however, muttered something and waved her hand. Phoenix saw a faint purple-blue glow around her fingers. He had no way to ask her what she’d done, so he listened to Marcus’ deep voice, instead.

“Sir,” the Roman said, “the High Priest is needed below. Some prisoners are requesting an audience – something about the treasure of Netjerikhet.”

Phoenix exchanged an admiring glance with Brynn. That was a much better story than ‘prisoners escaping’. There was a long silence and then the light brightened. The door must have opened wider. A different voice spoke.

“Come in and wait for our master. He is performing the Ceremony of Lost Souls. When he is finished, I will fetch him and you may tell him yourselves.”

Phoenix grimaced, realising they would now have to deal with at least one other person besides the High Priest. Footsteps sounded and the light began to dim again as the door closed behind Marcus and Heron. Phoenix felt a moment of panic. If the door locked, they wouldn’t be able to help. As if reading his thoughts, Brynn darted from Phoenix’s side and slid the blade of his curved dagger alongside the door frame, stopping the latch from falling as the door thudded closed.

Phoenix let out a silent sigh of relief and squeezed Brynn’s shoulder as Jade joined them. Together, they eased the door open a fraction and listened.

“I can’t understand why he swallowed that story,” Marcus murmured to Heron. Obviously the priest had left the room. “Let’s find the sword – it’s very plain-looking.”

Jade leaned close and whispered in Phoenix’s ear. “I used a *believe* Command spell on the guy who opened the door. I think the Command spell works best if these priests don’t know it’s coming.”

He gave her a thumbs-up. “Sweet. Let’s help them look.”

Together they slipped into the room and spread out to search. Marcus frowned at them, perhaps concerned that they’d diverged from the original plan. Brynn stayed by the door, watching the stairs and signalling them all to hurry up.

Even Phoenix had trouble keeping his mind on what they were looking for. The High Priest’s study was a fascinating, horrifying place. The stone walls were darkened with soot from torches and fires. A chandelier, made from bone and skulls, hung from the high ceiling. Skeletons of birds seemed to fly through the air around it, hanging by thin wires. On every surface lay evidence that the owner of this room practiced a sinister and unpleasant form of magic: skulls, bones, weapons of grisly design, instruments of torture, books bound with what looked like blackened human skin; scrolls of the same material, a small statue of Set with glittering black eyes that seemed to watch their every move.

He looked across at Jade. She had her head tilted and eyes narrowed, which meant she was looking for magical auras.

“See Blódbál’s aura?”

She shook her head. “I can’t pick it out. Practically everything’s magical here!” She whispered. When he reached out to pick up a small dagger, she gripped his wrist with astonishing strength. “Don’t touch anything. The auras are a really nasty blood-purple, which means they’re dark magic. Brynn,” she raised her voice as the boy edged back into the room, apparently fascinated by the array of small, portable objects within reach, “you do *not* want to take anything in here, believe me.” Shuddering, she picked up a black cloth and threw it over the statue of Set that lurked on the black desk.

“You found it!” Phoenix reached past her and snatched up his sword, cradling it to his chest before strapping the belt around his hips. It had been beneath the cloth.

She let out a soft sigh. “Thank heavens. Let’s get out of here.”

“There’s your dagger, too,” Marcus indicated the ruby-studded life-dagger. Phoenix snatched it up, shoved it back into its sheath and strapped it to his hip. Next he grabbed Heron’s arm and headed toward the door.

“Let’s go before the priest comes back! Ow!” He collided with Brynn as the boy backed into the room. “Brynn, we need to go out, not in,” he grumbled, shoving at him.

Brynn pushed back, shaking his head. "Sounds like there're a dozen guards coming up the stairs. We need to find another way out."

As one, the five companions looked at the only other door. The priest had gone through it to get the High Priest. Who knew what lay beyond its scorched wood? The priest had said his master was performing the Ceremony of Lost Souls. Phoenix wondered briefly if it was to *find* lost souls or to *make* them lost.

Marcus tried the handle. It was locked. Brynn shut and locked the main door as the sound of marching feet got louder. He scooted over to Marcus and drew out two thin pieces of metal from somewhere in his clothing. With them, he probed inside the heavy iron lock.

Phoenix pursed his lips and glared at Brynn. "Did you have those things on you the whole time in that cell? Did I go through that routine of taking out the guard for nothing?"

The boy sent him a quirky half-grin. "I like a bit of fun but I'm not *stupid*. They took them off me in the pyramid. I just found them again in here. Got my dagger, sword and sling back, too." He patted his weapons with satisfaction.

Phoenix continued to eye him suspiciously, wondering if he'd taken anything else, in spite of Jade's warning. The boy gave him an innocent, wide-eyed look he didn't believe for an instant then went back to working on the lock. Jade wrapped her arms around herself and moved over to look out the window, probably trying to get as far away from the magic items in the room as possible.

He hadn't really thought of the window was a possible escape route but it was fairly wide and let in a fresh breeze from off the nearby river. Phoenix joined her and peered out. It was not as high as he'd expected. In fact, it was only a short drop onto what looked like the back roof of the temple.

"It's no good," Brynn tucked his tools away. "I picked the lock but there's a bar on the other side I can't lift. We have to find another way and fast." As if to emphasise his point, there was a loud thumping knock on the main entrance. Distant, hurrying footsteps now sounded behind the door Brynn had been working on.

"Oh my," Heron murmured, wringing his gnarled hands. "I think the priest is coming back."

"You don't say," Phoenix muttered.

"I think we can get out the window, if anyone's got some rope," Jade called.

Another knock sounded on the door; followed by a guard's annoyed question.

Everyone looked around but there was no convenient coil of rope.

Phoenix glanced at Marcus, who gave him an ironic smile and half-shake of his head. "Not this time. I haven't had the opportunity to replace the one you used on the troll."

Jade snatched at the black cloth she had used to cover the statue of Set.

"We'll have to use this," she tore it into strips, knotted them together then knotted a corner of it around the thick leg of a table standing beside the window. "Barricade the priest's door and let's go. Quickly!"

Phoenix shoved a chest over to the door and wedged it beneath the handle. The sound of regular pounding and shouting now began from the main door. The guards were trying to break it down. From behind the other door came a scrabbling and grunting as the priest tried to push it inward.

He pushed back, hoping to buy time for the others. Heron had already vanished out the window. Jade supervised as first Brynn then Marcus clambered nimbly down the cloth to land beside Heron on the rooftop below.

The chest beneath him jerked again as someone pushed hard against the door. Jade's head disappeared below the window ledge. One of the panels of wood in the main

door exploded in a spray of splinters and a hand reached through, feeling for the lock. Definitely time to go.

As Phoenix jumped for the window, several things seemed to happen all at once. The entry door flew open and half a dozen black-robed guards burst in. The heavy chest was shoved aside as the other door opened and two priests strode in. One wore a golden mask. Phoenix swore and backed toward the window, sword ready. Would Blódbál be enough to protect him against this priest's magic and the weapons of six trained guards? Even as he wondered, a dozen more guards pressed into the room, weapons drawn.

With a cry of anger, three leapt at him, curved swords flashing in the torchlight. Pinned against the window and table, he parried their blows with Blódbál and yanked his dagger from its sheath. Luckily, the space was so cramped that only a few could attack at once. Wishing for his shield, he turned aside a blade aimed at his throat and pushed back against the three swords locked against his, over his head.

Fear fled before a rush of adrenalin. Phoenix growled low in his throat and grinned in savage delight. Once again he felt a surge of strength and power as Blódbál began to take over his actions, turning his body into a perfect fighting machine.

Somehow, it became easy to foresee each blow before it fell; avoid each hazard in the cluttered room; twist aside from each slicing strike of those lethal blades. Metal clashed with metal; a guard grunted in pain as Phoenix's dagger found his ribs. Over and over Blódbál flicked out, parried and darted in to taste the blood of the enemy. Guards began to trip over bodies of their comrades as well as the many books and objects strewn about the room. Phoenix kicked a book into one man's face, causing him to trip backward over a small, steaming cauldron. The black, viscous liquid in the cauldron hissed and ate its way through a stack of books, sending off toxic fumes and clouding the air with choking grey smoke. Taking advantage of the confusion, he overturned a heavy table, pinning two men against a wall. There were still too many.

Leaping onto a low stool, Phoenix tucked his dagger into his belt and snatched up a slim black-handled blade that lay on a shelf. Gauging the distance, he flipped it over and threw it at the High Priest, who stood impassively just inside the second door. The gold-masked man didn't move or flinch. He didn't even raise a hand as a red-masked priest deliberately stepped in front of the oncoming blade. It sank up to the hilt in his chest instead of his masters' and he slumped to the ground without a sound.

Phoenix didn't waste time on his failed attempt. He jumped down from the stool, kicked it up into one guard's face and pulled his dagger out again just in time to deflect a blow aimed at his neck. A second sliced at his stomach. He twisted aside, feeling the tip catch and tear the loose cloth of his shirt. That was too close. More guards were arriving. It was only a matter of time before sheer numbers overwhelmed him, even with Blódbál's help. He had to get out.

Panting, he found himself back against the window. There was a pause as the guards stopped fighting and looked toward their High Priest for guidance. Now was the time to escape.

The black-robed guards withdrew a little, leaving a space littered with bodies and slippery with blood. Phoenix felt a rush of triumph at the sight. *He* had done that. With Blódbál he was practically invincible. The irresistible pulse of its battle-song filled his mind, whispering, encouraging, and willing him to fight on; kill more; spill more blood. It was hard to think of anything else. The desire to fight, kill and destroy the enemy was almost overwhelming.

Then the High Priest raised his hands and pointed at the dead warriors. A shaft of purple-blue speared from his fingertips, earthing in each inanimate form. His dark eyes glittered with satisfaction behind that smooth, golden mask. The image of those limp

bodies twitching as the priest's dark magic hit them was enough to shock the power of Blódbál out of Phoenix's mind. All desire to cross swords with zombie-guards vanished. Jerkily, the dead men stood up, their faces now blank, eyes milky-white. As one, they stepped toward Phoenix, swords raised again. Behind them, the living guards grinned.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sheathing his dagger, Phoenix picked up a lit candle and threw it into the largest pile of papers he could see. The flames caught and raced across the surface like it was soaked in petrol. Each flicker danced with purple-blue after-images. The black smoke it gave off reeked and stung the eyes. *That* got a reaction. With an angry shriek, the Priest of Set snatched at his precious artefacts and papers.

Phoenix smiled as the gold-masked sorcerer began ordering his henchmen to put out the rapidly-spreading fire. That should keep them busy enough not to chase him. He sheathed his sword, silencing its song. Clambering up onto the windowsill, he balanced on it and tried to watch the entire room at once. With a grin, he threw the coughing guards a mocking salute. Before the astonished rabble could react, he reached down, grabbed the black cloth and leapt out of the window.

He grunted in pain as his shoulder and ribs slammed into the temple wall. That stunt looked great in the movies and games but it *hurt*. Friction from the cloth burned his fingers and the wall was *hard*. Tightening his grip, he shook his head to clear the stars and shoved away from the stone.

From overhead came a clattering and angry muttering as the guards pushed to see where he had gone. Smoke billowed out the window. He let the cloth slide through his hands, glancing down to judge the distance to the ground. He didn't want to fall on anyone's head. It was a bit worrying to realise that it wasn't going to be an issue: everyone was gone. All his friends had, apparently, vanished and left him to his fate. Lacking Blódbál's song of invincibility to ward it off, fear and anger surged almost painfully through his guts.

The cloth jerked in his hands and, with an unpleasant tearing sound, lost all tension. The guards had cut his safety line. As he fell, Phoenix heard a mocking jeer from the window above.

Still clutching the remnant of fabric, he tried to think about how best to hit the roof below. He tucked his chin in, tightened his stomach muscles and spread out his arms and legs, hoping to absorb the worst of the fall and keep his skull intact. He couldn't afford to lose any more lives. At the last second, he remembered to force all the air out of his lungs.

The fall seemed to take a lot longer than he expected and the stone wall didn't go past nearly as fast as it should have. In fact, he appeared to be slowing down. It felt as though he was sliding down through a deep, cool pool of water. Cautiously, Phoenix sucked in a breath of night air and twisted his head to see why. The first pink hints of dawn showed him to be in a very strange situation indeed.

He was floating bare inches above the sloping, stone-tiled roof. What the heck had happened to gravity? Was the High Priest somehow trying to pull him back up to the tower? Glancing up, he could see only thick clouds of rancid smoke coming out of the window. OK, not the High Priest then. So how did he get down?

A loud hiss drifted up from the shadows in the street below.

"C'mon, Phoenix!" It was Brynn's voice. "Jade can't hold you up forever. Get on your feet and get down here."

Bewildered, Phoenix wriggled and turned until he could get his feet under himself. There was a sudden feeling of weight as gravity re-asserted its rights and his knees collapsed under the strain. Falling awkwardly, he slithered down the roof toward Brynn's voice. Stone tiles slipped out from under his hands and feet, crashing onto the street

below. Before he could stop himself, momentum carried him right off the gutterless edge of the rooftop and he was, once more, in midair.

Again there came a sensation of floating to earth. This time it only lasted a brief moment. He just managed to be ready for it when mass returned and landed on his feet with only a slight jar through his heels. Grinning, he peered around, looking for Brynn and the others.

Half-hidden in the gloom of the alley were their horses and gear. Marcus, Brynn, Jade and Heron were already mounted, although Jade was slumped in the saddle with her eyes closed. Heron looked more than a little ridiculous mounted on the small pack-pony. He'd discarded the black priest's robe and his filthy tunic and toga were rucked up to his thighs, skinny old legs sticking out at a ridiculous angle. Marcus held the horse's reins.

Hearing cries of alarm from the burning temple, Phoenix swung into the saddle of his stallion, gasping at a sudden stitch that lanced pain through his stomach. He gritted his teeth and nodded to Marcus. The Roman kicked his mount and they all followed, winding through the back streets toward the river, away from immediate danger. Pink fire lit the sky as the sun came up and turned the Nile to liquid gold.

Phoenix caught up with Jade and reached across to touch her arm. "Thanks. What was that spell?"

She sent him a weary smile. "Another new one from Asulfr's book. It's called *létta*, which means 'stop'. I wasn't sure it would do what I wanted it to but it was the only one I could think of at the time. I'm glad it worked."

"Me too," he agreed wholeheartedly. "I thought you'd abandoned me for a moment there."

"You must know by now that I wouldn't," she sighed.

Phoenix shrugged.

With a resigned look, Jade shook her head. "I can't promise I'll always be perfect, Phoenix. Of course I'll make mistakes and other bad things will happen to you but," she reached over and gripped his arm, her green eyes intent, "I'm getting worried about you. Ever since you got Blodbal, you haven't been yourself."

"What are you talking about?" he jerked his arm free, irritated. "I'm fine. Blodbal's the best thing that's happened to me here. I'm almost invincible with it."

"But it's affecting your thinking," Jade insisted. "You're much more...I don't know...impulsive, untrusting...*angry*, I guess. You have to keep it under control. Remember what Thor said about it taking over if you let it?" She frowned at him. "Don't let the sword make your reactions stronger than they should be. *You* can control how much people affect your emotions. *You* control how much you react."

Phoenix stared at her for a moment, shocked and a bit annoyed that she had seen so much of how he felt. What right did she have to give him advice on emotions anyway? She acted like an emotional yo-yo half the time. Control how much you react? What a laugh.

Shaking his head impatiently, he pressed a hand to his stomach, still feeling the remnants of pain from the fear and that stitch. He sucked a quick breath through his teeth and tried to ignore the ache. Under his fingers he felt a strange slickness and his own skin, instead of cloth. Puzzled, he looked down at his hand. Bright red blood covered his palm. It pumped sluggishly from a long slice across his belly. Phoenix stared at it, feeling lightheaded. He hadn't even felt the knife cut him. How strange.

The world spun and seemed to turn upside down before going black.

Jade caught Phoenix by the arm as he collapsed; tugging so he fell forward across his horses' neck.

“Marcus!” she called. “Phoenix is injured. We need to get him somewhere safe so I can work on him.”

The Roman reined his horse in and handed Heron’s off to Brynn. The old man slewed around in his saddle, mouth agape. Edging alongside Phoenix’s unconscious body, Marcus looked over his shoulder at the Temple of Set. It was well alight now, black smoke billowing freely from every window.

“I don’t think we can stay in this area. The temple will send assassins after us as soon as that fire is under control.”

Jade bit her lip. “But Phoenix can’t afford to lose another life. I’ve got to try and heal him.”

“Are you strong enough?” Marcus eyed her, undoubtedly noting the dark circles beneath her eyes.

She nodded. “I’ll have to be. Where can we go? He can’t lose much more blood and, after I’ve done what I can, he won’t be able to ride for at least a day.”

“What about my barge?” Heron’s gentle voice interrupted their low conversation. They looked at him blankly. “I’m sorry to interfere but I overheard what you said. If we can’t stay here and we can’t ride, why don’t we take my barge and sail down the Nile to Alexandria? I live there and you’ll be safe in my house until he recovers.”

Jade exchanged glances with Marcus. “I thought you’d been in prison,” she asked. “How do you know it will still be where you left it?”

Heron shook his head and smiled. “The Roman Proconsul of Alexandria sent me as a special envoy to Memphis. It’s his barge, really. Believe me, the men won’t go anywhere without express orders from me or the Proconsul.”

“Why should you help us?” she couldn’t help feeling suspicious of this stranger.

“Well...” the old man stroked his matted white beard and shrugged. “You and your friends did get me out of that place.”

“Is that all?” Jade pressed. There was something not right about Heron’s reason but she couldn’t say exactly what.

The old man looked guiltily at Phoenix’s inert body. “I did also overhear you calling that young man ‘Phoenix’. He gave me his name as ‘Drake’. Is his name truly ‘Phoenix’?”

Behind Heron, Brynn waved his hands, trying to give Jade some message she couldn’t quite understand. She frowned at him. Heron glanced at the boy and smiled in reassurance.

“No, no. Don’t worry youngster, I don’t intend your friend any harm. Quite the contrary, actually. If he truly is the Phoenix of legend then his destiny is one of greatness and glory. He is the one who will save Egypt from death and disaster.”

“Wuh?” Jade asked feeling thickheaded. “Phoenix is destined to save Egypt from death and disaster? How?”

Brynn nudged his horse forward. “It’s a long story,” he sent her a significant look. “Right now we need to get moving.”

“Agreed,” Marcus nodded. “Shall we take Heron’s barge?” Both companions looked at Jade.

She tilted her head, eyeing Heron. He seemed harmless enough. Looking at Phoenix’s crumpled form she saw a trickle of blood drip down his leg. His stallion began to edge nervously sideways, tossing its head. Sighing, she nodded.

“We don’t seem to have much choice. Lead on but,” she sent the old man a fierce look, “don’t even *think* of betraying us, old man, or I’ll kill you myself!”

“My dear girl,” he replied, smiling broadly, “I am absolutely no danger to you. I find you all completely fascinating. Do let us hurry, though.”

Jade hovered over Phoenix, hoping he would open his eyes. Even now, when they were almost to the safety of Alexandria, she couldn't relax. It had been a difficult river trip, though it had only lasted half a day. The Proconsul's barge was a low-sided, many-oared affair with one large, square sail in the centre. Though impressively decorated and gilded, it afforded little shelter for people or horses. Overcrowded and hot, the horses were nervous and difficult to keep still. The oarsmen grumbled about being put to work after two weeks of relaxation in the inns of Memphis. Heron did some fast talking to convince the captain to take on four passengers and five laden horses. In the end, Brynn grudgingly slipped the man something from his treasure hoard.

They carried Phoenix under the cover of the Proconsul's pavilion at the rear end of the boat. There, hidden from view of the crew by curtains, Jade attempted to heal his wound. She hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours and her powers were weaker out on the water, away from forests. Even the new inner strength she'd found and the power of the yin-yang amulet was not enough to cure him. No matter what she did, the wound continued to seep blood. Worse, it was now crusted with an ugly darkening of the flesh that seemed to be spreading.

Marcus came in to find her frustrated and exhausted. He knelt beside the ornate day-bed where Phoenix lay moaning and tossing.

"Can't you help him?"

Jade shook her head, dashing angry tears away. "I don't understand it. I've done *everything*. I've tried every herb in my store and every spell I know – plus a few new ones. Nothing will seal the cut and he's bleeding internally."

Marcus stripped off a glove, placed the back of his hand on Phoenix's sweat-soaked brow and frowned. "He has a fever. Perhaps the priests of Set poison their knives."

She bit her lip and nodded. "That's what I think, too. If so, it's a poison I don't know." She rubbed a hand over her face, smearing charcoal, tears and sweat across her fair, flushed skin.

"Maybe there's a doctor in Alexandria who will know an antidote," he suggested but his dark eyes were heavy with worry, too.

Jade dropped her forehead onto her arms as she knelt beside the bed. "I don't think we have time for that, Marcus. We can't afford to lose weeks while he recovers from something like this."

She raised her head and stared bleakly at the Roman. "I think I'll have to kill him."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Marcus gazed back at her then slowly nodded his agreement. His lips formed a small, wry smile. "I never thought I would use a phrase like 'kill him to save his life'."

Jade gave a weak laugh, grateful for his support.

He drew out his dagger and hefted it in the palm of his hand with a regretful glance at Phoenix. "Even though I know, logically, that he will have at least three more lives to live, I'm not sure I can take one from him."

"I know," she breathed. "I don't think I can do it, either. He's my friend. How can I kill him? Plus, if I do, how can he get through two more lev...quests after this with only three lives."

He gave her a serious look. "When we began this venture together, you put a Binding Spell on us all."

Jade blinked at him, tiredness making her thinking sluggish. "So?"

"Our fates are bound together. Even without that spell, I would give *my* life to protect him or you, just as you have both given yours to protect me."

"It's not quite the same for us, though," she protested, feeling stupid because she didn't understand what point he was trying to make.

He put his iron gloves down and grabbed her arms. Giving her a little shake, he frowned at her. "When the time comes, you must promise me you will find a way to take my life force and give it to Phoenix or yourself – if it is what you need to kill Zhudai at the end of these quests. Do you promise?"

She gaped at him then shook herself free of his grip.

"I can't promise you that. I can't! I wouldn't even know how, anyway." she shook her head adamantly. She was exhausted and strung out after the events of the night. How could he ask her something like that right now? It was hard enough to decide to kill Phoenix and he had a couple to spare. Marcus had only one.

Pursing his lips, Marcus shrugged. "I have seen it done but maybe now is not the best time for this. At least think about what I've said." He waited until she nodded reluctantly then returned his brooding gaze to Phoenix's restless form.

Leaning in, he sniffed at the ugly wound on his friend's belly. Screwing up his face in distaste, he glanced back at Jade.

"The wound is putrefying. We have to put him out of pain now, before the poison seeps into every organ." Lifting his dagger, he readied to strike. Jade could see his throat and jaw muscles working as he steeled himself to deliver the killing blow.

"Wait!" She grabbed at his wrist as he raised it. "I should be the one to do it."

"No," Marcus pulled his hand free. "You need to be ready to cleanse his body of poison; otherwise he'll come back to life with exactly the same problem."

She silently cursed her own stupidity. He was right. Why hadn't she thought of it? Nodding, she pulled out the last of her healing herbs and made them into a paste with a little water. When she was done, Marcus raised his arm again.

He looked down at Phoenix's sweating face and dropped his arm. "...I don't think I can."

At that moment, Jade remembered he was only a sixteen year old boy, really; barely older than her own real self. He seemed so much wiser sometimes. She leaned her head on his shoulder and, together, they looked at their friend.

"So what do we do?" she whispered.

“Oh, for the love of the Earth Mother!” Brynn’s slight figure slipped out from behind the billowing silk curtains that surrounded Phoenix’s bed. “Stop being so pathetic, both of you. Just do what has to be done.”

Without another word, he lifted his hand above his head and plunged his dagger into Phoenix’s chest.

Jade gasped in shock and felt Marcus jerk beside her. Phoenix arched his back, his eyes wide and unseeing; his mouth opened in a silent scream of agony. Brynn pulled his dagger free with a look of horror. Phoenix slumped and his head lolled to one side.

For a few precious seconds, Jade stared at his body, unable to believe what had happened. Brynn! Brynn had just killed Phoenix. How could he? Then she looked up at the boy and her anger crumbled. Tears poured down Brynn’s thin face. His bottom lip trembled and his brown eyes were black with misery. Swallowing her own confused emotions, she scrambled closer to the bed and snatched up the cup of herb-paste.

“Quick, Brynn,” she ordered. “Use your knife to cut away the worst of the dead flesh in that wound. Marcus, get me some more water. Hurry. We may only have a few moments before he comes back to life.”

Marcus left and Jade snatched Brynn into her arms for a brief hug. She didn’t want to embarrass him in front of Marcus but the boy needed reassurance, as did she.

“You did the right thing, Brynn. I’m so sorry you had to do it, though. Thank you,” she whispered. He nodded against her shoulder and squeezed her for a second before pushing away. Wiping his face, he eyed the injury on Phoenix’s stomach with revulsion that turned quickly into resolve.

“Let’s make him well so I never have to do it again,” the boy ordered.

Phoenix drifted up from a deep sleep and wondered where he was. He tried to open his eyes but his eyelids were stuck together with grit and sleep. It took an extraordinary amount of effort to lift his hand up to rub them clear. It was even harder to control his arm. He kept smacking himself in the nose or the forehead. Finally he managed the task and opened his eyes. It didn’t help. He still had no idea where he was.

Above him hung a whitewashed, wooden ceiling with exposed beams. From the sound of footsteps overhead, he guessed there was a room up there. Turning his head, he could see four walls and a doorway. The walls were smoothly plastered and the bottom half ornately decorated with paintings and frescoes, lit by dusty, golden, afternoon sunlight. People, animals and plants seemed to dance in front of his vision. For some reason, there were a lot of grapes. At least it wasn’t another dark prison cell. That was a plus.

With a grunt, he pushed himself up on the bed and held his spinning head in the hopes that it wouldn’t fall off. What the heck had happened? Last he remembered was riding through the streets of Memphis at dawn. No, wait. Blood. There had been blood on his hand and stomach.

Tossing the sheets aside, Phoenix pulled up the white, sleeveless tunic he now wore and felt his belly. Sure enough, there was a long, narrow scar almost dividing him in half. It felt well-healed, so he’d either been unconscious a long time or Jade had been at work again.

He glanced around for his things. Blódbál, his dagger and other possessions were piled on a nearby table. Standing shakily, he changed into his own, cleaned clothes and strapped on his weapons with a feeling of relief and security. Patting Blódbál, he picked up the dagger and examined it.

Even counting the rubies three times didn’t make it easier to believe. What little strength he had drained from his legs and he sank back onto the bed, clutching the knife. He was still there when Jade, Marcus and Brynn came in.

"You're awake!" Jade cried, clearly relieved. "You've been asleep since yesterday. We were getting worried. We're running out of time." The three of them crowded around him, patting and thumping him as though they had to confirm he really was there. Dumbly, he held the dagger out and they all fell silent. Marcus backed away to lean against a wall. Brynn scratched his shaggy head and fell to picking at his fingernails.

"There are only three left," he said, dazed. "How? What happened? I got away from the Temple of Set with hardly a scratch. Why was I asleep so long?"

Jade crouched beside him, looking both guilty and concerned. "We think the knife that cut you was poisoned. I couldn't heal you."

"So you let me die?" Phoenix gaped at her.

"Kind of," she murmured, glancing at Marcus and Brynn.

"What do you mean, 'kind of'," his brain was still foggy. "Did you let me die or not?"

Marcus pushed himself off the wall and stepped forward. "We didn't have the time or resources to try and find an antidote for the poison. It seemed like the best option we had was to...take another of your lives."

Phoenix raised his eyebrows as the implications of that sentence sank in. "You mean... you mean....you...you *killed* me? I only had four lives left and you *killed* me? How am I supposed to get through the rest of this god-riddled world with only three lives? Who did it?" He staggered to his feet, ignoring Jade's wordless plea. He glared, first at Marcus then at Jade, feeling an old, helpless anger rise from deep within.

"I'm sorry Phoenix," her green eyes were clouded with worry. "We really didn't have a choice."

"You didn't answer me," he stepped nearer, glowering. "Which one of you killed me?"

"Enough dramatics!" Marcus moved between them and grabbed his shoulder with an iron grip. "We did what we thought was the right thing at the time. We still think it was the right thing. We're in Heron's house in Alexandria; it's only one day later and you're perfectly healthy. We still have time to complete the quest before the death of the moon - which is probably tonight, by the way. If we'd tried to cure you we would have been here for weeks or months at least and still might not have succeeded. It doesn't matter who wielded the knife."

Phoenix looked at him coldly and pushed his hands aside. "It matters to me. I need to know who I can trust."

Without a backward look, he strode from the room, out into the blazing sunshine of Alexandria. For a moment he was blinded as light reflected off the four walls of a courtyard. His room opened out onto it, as did many others. Angry momentum carried him into the centre of the open space before he had time to look around. Three sides of the yard seemed to be part of a large, white-walled house; the fourth some sort of entranceway. The floor boasted a huge, intricate mosaic of tiles in geometric patterns. All around were large potted plants and stone benches.

Behind, Jade called his name. The sound triggered a renewed surge of fury. He had to get away and think. With his hand on Blódbál's hilt, he felt its reassuring strength rush into him. It fuelled his anger at his friends and he almost ran toward the barred entranceway door. Shoving aside a curious servant, Phoenix pushed up the bar and opened the door.

Heron's house fronted onto a massive, open, paved public square. In its centre, an ornately carved stone fountain bubbled gently at the base of a huge stone column. All around the square were brightly coloured market tents and stalls. Dozens of people moved among them; chattering and inspecting food and wares for sale. Most were clad in the toga and tunic of the Roman citizen, showing this to be a very Roman section of Alexandria.

On either side of Heron's house, a cobbled street stretched away to the east and west. It was lined with houses of similar, Roman design. Phoenix turned east at random and began walking. He picked up the pace to a jog as his limbs regained strength. When he heard his name called again, he broke into a run without looking back.

"Should I follow him?" Brynn asked Jade, frowning after Phoenix's retreating figure.

"Do you think you can do it without him seeing?" she responded, worried. Waves of anger were almost visible in his wake. She'd known he wouldn't be happy but she hadn't expected such an extreme reaction.

"Absolutely," Brynn replied with determination. She nodded and the boy took off, sprinting to keep Phoenix in sight.

She sank down on a bench outside the front door, shaking with reaction. Even with a full night's rest, she wasn't yet recovered after curing Phoenix. Cleansing his body of poison had been easier without his life force fighting her for control of his body but it was still draining. To make things worse, her sleep had been disturbed by nightmarish images of the Temple of Set burning and the gold-faced High Priest cursing them. She shivered, hoping fervently that they would never encounter him again.

"Will you be alright here?" Marcus looked up the street in the direction Phoenix and Brynn had gone.

"I'll be fine," she assured him. "I need to restock my herb supply and Heron's anxious to show me his workshop when he gets back. You go after them. I'm worried about Brynn, too."

Marcus answered with distracted curiosity. "Where has our host gone?"

"He said something about reporting to the Proconsul of Rome about his mission to Memphis," Jade shrugged.

"Do you think he'll mention us?" He frowned, apparently troubled by the thought. She realised the last thing he would want was a Roman governor who might recognise him or remember his father.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. I asked him not to and he seems trustworthy enough. I hope. We don't have much choice at the moment, anyway."

"Go back inside and rest then," Marcus ordered. "I'll follow the others and bring them back as soon as Phoenix has cooled down." He ran two steps then stopped and looked back.

"You did put that illusion spell on Brynn and Phoenix, didn't you? Zhudai can't Farsee us, can he?"

"No, he can't," she assured him. "It was the first thing I did when we got onto Heron's barge. Promise."

He nodded and took off. The sound of his sandals hitting the cobblestones echoed sharply back from the walls. Jade sat for a few moments, soaking in the afternoon sun. Eventually, feeling stronger, she tried to put Phoenix out of her head and went inside to consult with the housekeeper about replenishing her herb bag and their food supplies.

Phoenix ran out of breath and strength almost before he ran out of sight of Heron's house. This was the worst death ever. He'd never felt so weak after being killed. Slowing to a walk, he put a hand to his stomach, pressing against a stitch here. Beneath his fingers, he felt the hard line of scar tissue. Poison blade! Poison was the weapon of cowards too afraid to fight with only their skill and a clean blade.

He followed the street until it intersected with one going south. Still moving at random, he turned and kept walking, beginning to take an interest in his surroundings. The streets were wide and regularly laid-out in a grid pattern. It was a well-planned city and this area

seemed affluent and clean. All the houses appeared similar to Heron's – a three-sided, two-storied affair with a front wall. He could hear children playing in the courtyards inside.

Children. Sometimes he felt little more than a child, himself. He was, really. He'd started this character as an alter ego – a strongman who could cope with more than his own, thirteen year old real life body could. Since he couldn't stand up to his stepfather, Jacob, in the real world, he'd just wanted somewhere he could at least *pretend* he was invincible. Now it was clear that he wasn't good enough in this form, either. How could he possibly handle two, even harder, levels of this game? He flexed his arm, feeling the muscles move. His warrior body was strong but obviously not strong enough if he'd been killed by poison.

No! Not the poison; by his own friends! The people he was supposed to trust; the people he *had* come to trust. They were as bad as Jacob – always telling him what to do; never listening. It was pretty obvious they didn't really care about him. Jade just needed him and his sword arm to get her home. Brynn wanted treasure and Marcus just wanted revenge against Zhudai.

Phoenix kicked savagely at a loose stone in the street. It ricocheted off a wall and skittered up the cobblestones. A passing servant gave him a scared glance and hurried away. Turning west into another cross-street Phoenix kept going, lost in a maze of anger and self-doubt.

This street opened out onto a large square full of tents and people. He stared in confusion before realised he'd come in a big loop and now stood in the market square outside of Heron's house.

He wasn't ready to go back yet. With one hand laid on the hilt of his sword, he pushed moodily through the crowds, ignoring outraged protests and whispered comments. Shoving his way past hawkers and customers alike, he strode into the centre of the square.

The peaceful burbling of the fountain appealed. He was hot and already tired. Sitting on the stone edge, he gazed into the murky water and wished for a drink. He didn't have any money on him to buy one. Reaching down, he cupped a handful and rubbed it over his head. At least it helped cool him a little. Shaking his head like a dog sent sparkling drops of water spraying in all directions.

Sighing, Phoenix scraped his long hair back from his face and gazed around at the busy scene before him. The sun sank lower in the sky behind him, sending long shadows sliding up the walls of the surrounding houses.

Shadows. The significance of what he was seeing finally sank in. He focussed on one, very long shadow that outstripped the others. One very long, pointy shadow. Skewing around, he squinted up at the stone column arising from the centre of the fountain.

It was an obelisk. An obelisk covered in Egyptian hieroglyphs. An obelisk, covered in hieroglyphs, right outside Heron's house. The Obelisk of Anuket.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Marcus! Where are you!”

Jade hurried out of the kitchens at the sound of Phoenix’s excited yell. At least he didn’t sound angry any more. When she got to the courtyard he was there, still hollering. He saw her and ran over.

“Where’s Marcus with the hammer. I’ve found the tekhen – the obelisk of Anuket!” His blue eyes sparkled with anticipation.

“I’m here,” Marcus’ steady voice sounded from behind him and Phoenix spun to face Marcus and Brynn as they came into the courtyard through the outer door. Jade held her breath, hoping he wouldn’t take offence at being followed. He didn’t even seem to notice.

“C’mon,” Phoenix urged. “The obelisk is right out front. We can destroy it now, release Anuket and finish this quest.” Dragging Marcus and Brynn by the arms, he jerked his head at Jade. Together they all went out and stared at the towering monument that dominated the square.

“That’s it?” Marcus asked. Phoenix nodded, grinning.

“In the Temple of Set, Heron mentioned it was in front of his house. That’s why we agreed to take him with us.” He slapped Marcus on the shoulder and gave him a shove. “Get that hammer out and start pounding.”

Jade, Marcus and Brynn exchanged glances then looked around at the busy marketplace. None of them wanted to burst Phoenix’s bubble but it had to be done.

“Ummm,” she began. “Maybe I should read the hieroglyphs to make sure and then we could wait until dark when there’s not so many people around. Someone might get hurt by the falling rock.”

The darkness came into Phoenix’s eyes again and he glowered at her. “So you’re worried about killing one of *them* but not me, huh?”

“That’s not fair,” she said, trying to keep him calm. He really was acting strangely. Maybe she hadn’t got all the poison out of him; maybe it was affecting his mind. Stretching out a hand, she moved to touch his head, thinking to try and sense the presence of a toxin. He jerked back, batting her fingers away with a growl. He laid a hand on Blódbál and half-drew it out. Jade backed up, staring at him in disbelief.

For several tense moments, he glared at his three friends as though they were mortal enemies. Nobody moved. Then Phoenix seemed to fold in on himself. His eyes rolled up and he crumpled to the ground in a dead faint.

Jade hurried forward to check his vital signs.

“What happened?” Brynn stared down at the fallen warrior, worry and regret pinching his face.

She pursed her lips. “*Sleep Command.*” She touched the pulse at the base of his throat. “He’ll be out for an hour or so, I’d say. He was still tired anyway.”

Marcus raised sceptical brows but said nothing as he stooped to slide his hands beneath Phoenix’s shoulders.

“He’s not going to be happy when he wakes up,” Brynn grabbed Phoenix around the stomach.

“Can’t be much worse than he already is,” she grimaced, gathering up his legs.

Together the three managed to get him back into Heron’s house and into bed. They stood over him, examining his peaceful expression. Jade touched a hand to his forehead, frowning in concentration. There were no toxins in his system at all.

“He’s being really weird, isn’t he?” Brynn broke the silence at last.

“I don’t know what’s got into him,” she shook her head.

Marcus raised one dark brow. "Being killed by us seems to be playing on his mind. In fact, he doesn't seem to like being killed at all."

"Who does?" she shrugged, "but it's more than that. Something is exaggerating his anger; making it worse."

As one of the three companions looked at the magic sword that lay sheathed by their friends' side. When the king of the Svear people had given Blódbál to Phoenix, he'd warned them of its power. Its name meant 'blood-fire', the berserker rage that sometimes engulfed Norse warriors of legend. Could it be having an effect on Phoenix?

"We could take it off him?" Brynn suggested.

Jade sent him a sceptical look. "You think he'll be unhappy when he wakes up and realises I Commanded him? Just imagine what he'd be like if he woke up and Blodbal was gone." She snorted, looking at the sword. "Besides, it makes his fighting awesomely good. We can't afford him to be less than brilliant as a swordsman. We'll just have to keep a close eye on him. In the mean time, we should get packed again, in case we have to leave in a hurry after we destroy the tekhen."

A disturbance in the courtyard interrupted their low conversation. They closed the door on Phoenix's room and went out to see what was happening. Heron had returned from the Proconsul's palace and hurried toward them, smiling. He had bathed and changed into a clean tunic and toga. His white beard and hair were neatly trimmed and he looked like a different man after a feed and a decent night's sleep in his own bed.

"Right!" He exclaimed. "That's over and done with. How's our patient doing?"

Jade stepped in his way as he tried to get to Phoenix's door. "He's still weak but he'll be fine. He just needs some more sleep. Say, weren't you going to show me your workshop? I'd so love to see your inventions." She took the old man by the elbow and turned him around.

Heron was no more immune to flattery from a beautiful young woman than any man. He beamed and patted her hand. "Of course, my dear. I'm sure you'll be most impressed with my aeolipile."

She paused, taken aback then nodded. "Yes, I'm sure I will."

Following him into the east wing of his house, she pulled up short at the chaotic scene that met her eyes when they entered his workshop.

"Oh! Have you had a break-in? I'm so sorry," she exclaimed, taking in the mess.

He laughed. "No, no! This is how it always is, I'm afraid. Now where did I put that...." His voice trailed off as he scabbled through some paperwork.

Jade gazed around in amazement. How could anyone work here? It reminded her of the study of the High Priest of Set but without any evil magic. No magic at all, in fact. Scrolls and papers littered every surface, weighted down by glass prisms and Egyptian, Greek and Roman statuettes. On one bench there was a strange device made of two glass flasks, a large glass bowl and several tubes connecting them. Beside that, on the floor, was a large copper cauldron on legs. Its top was sealed and from it sprouted two copper tubes that fed into a copper sphere. Sticking out from the sphere were two bent pipes. Jade had absolutely no idea what it was for. Possibly torture..or coffee-making?

"Ah!" Heron clapped his hands. "You spotted my aeolipile." He waved her over to the copper monstrosity and proceeded to explain its function in a great deal more detail than she actually wanted to hear. It was some sort of steam-powered turning device but, other than being used as a door-opener in a couple of buildings around town, Heron didn't seem to see any applications for it. He just liked inventing things for the sheer joy of it. Jade opened her mouth, intending to tell him about things like steam boats and steam trains but common sense cut in. It was only 80AD. How much different would the world be in her

time if she meddled with history and gave the ancient Romans superior technology like this?

She closed her eyes and groaned. This was not her reality; not her world's history. Get a grip, she admonished herself.

"Maybe I should go check on Phoenix," she edged toward the door, hoping he wouldn't mind. Heron was now deeply engrossed in a pile of manuscript and barely even noticed her hasty departure.

Phoenix still slept. To pass the time, she, Marcus and Brynn made good use of Heron's indoor bathhouse and laundry facilities. Jade was relieved to finally wash the dust and grit from her hair. She had to bribe Brynn to bathe with the offer of free time to roam the markets and streets on his own. The boy sent her a wicked grin as he skipped into the bath. She grimaced, hoping he was as good a thief as he said. These ancient civilisations often had extremely harsh punishments for theft.

While Brynn washed, she and Marcus sat in the dining room and planned the destruction of the tekhen of Anuket. The obelisk was quite tall and neither of them wanted the debris to fall on a house or person in the square. Jade would have to cast another *léttá* spell in the hopes that it would at least slow down the fall of stonework.

They drew a rough sketch of the square and the tekhen with charcoal on a piece of papyrus and were arguing about which direction would be best for it to fall, when Heron wandered past. He stopped and stared vaguely down at their drawing.

"That's the obelisk your friend was asking about. The one with Anuket's symbol all over it." Sitting down, he twitched the paper out of their hands and frowned at the arrows they'd drawn on it. "He never did say why he was so interested in Anuket. Perhaps you should tell me." Looking anything but vague, the old man sent Jade a piercing, intelligent gaze from beneath shaggy, white eyebrows.

Startled, she looked at Marcus. He shrugged and lay a casual hand on his sword hilt. She chewed on her lip, wishing she could consult with Phoenix. It wasn't really fair to just destroy the monument then move on, leaving Heron to take the blame for what his eccentric guests had done.

"This will sound insane, I know," she began. Heron leaned back on his chair with his hands clasped over his stomach.

"We have to destroy the obelisk in order to release Anuket. She's imprisoned in it. That's why we've come here and we can't let anyone stop us," she finished in a rush.

Surprisingly, Heron didn't leap up and summon guards to take them away. Instead, he leaned forward so his chair legs hit the floor with a loud *clunk*, startling his guests.

"Anuket's imprisoned, you say? Interesting," he frowned and nodded. "That could very well explain why the Nile hasn't flooded for so long. She is the goddess of the Flood and fertility, after all."

He inspected their drawing of the square again, stroking his beard. "And exactly how were you going to destroy the obelisk? It's very, very big."

"Umm," Jade faltered. They had promised Thor they would keep Mjölfnir safe and secret.

"Just accept that we can hit it hard enough to bring it down, sir," Marcus put in. He took his hand off his sword hilt and Jade saw his shoulders relax. He must have decided Heron was not a threat.

"Very well," the old man shrugged. He tapped the drawing. "You were trying to work out how to do it without causing damage to the surrounding houses, I assume?"

They nodded.

"Hmmm." The inventor gazed off into the distance, still stroking his beard. "Leave it with me for a little while and I'll do the mathematics so it will come to ground safely." He

sighed. "It does seem a pity to destroy such a lovely thing but there are many more about the city and Egypt is in desperate need of a good flood."

Rising from the table, he began to leave, muttering as he went. At the door he turned back. "I'm assuming your friend, Phoenix, will be the one to destroy the obelisk?"

Jade and Marcus stared at him in surprise before Jade found her voice. "Err, no. It's Marcus' job, actually."

"Really?" Heron's white brows flew almost up to his hairline. "Most unexpected. The legends all clearly speak of the Phoenix as the one who restores balance to Egypt and returns fertility to the land. Very odd. I wonder..."

They never did discover what he wondered, since he wandered off to his workshop without another word.

Jade and Marcus were left in the dining room, staring at each other in disbelief.

"Well, that was... interesting," Jade broke the silence at last.

"That's the second time he's said something about Phoenix saving the country," Marcus mused, staring after the old man.

"Well, he was wrong," she laid a hand on his arm. "It will be your turn this time. Only fair, really. Phoenix can't have all the glory."

"You mistake me," he said with a faint smile. "I have no desire for glory. I'm content to go down in history as an unknown. I simply wondered if there is more to this quest than we know. Maybe Phoenix *is* supposed to wield the hammer. Maybe only he can release Anuket."

"No," she shook her head. "I'm sure I would know if that were the case." The others all knew she had been visited by the mysterious grey lady during a between-lives limbo back in Alfheim on Level Two of the game. Her guide had given her some instructions as to what to do in the next three levels. There had been no mention of anyone specific needing to destroy the tekhen. Only that Anuket had to be released from her prison before the death of the moon, in order to complete the quest.

Brynn came in, towelling his unruly hair dry and grumbling complaints.

Jade chuckled. "It can't have been that bad. We're so lucky to be staying in a villa that has private baths. Most people share the public ones. Heron's bathhouse is wonderful."

"If you're a fish," he retorted. "I can't remember having so many baths in such a short space of time in my whole life. My skin will come off."

"Oh stop complaining," she couldn't help laughing at his indignation. "Tell us what Heron said when you were in the Temple of Set prison. Did he say anything about Phoenix having to do some specific task?"

Brynn screwed up his nose in an effort to remember. "He went on about the legend of the Phoenix bird – something about burning up and a baby bird coming out of the ashes. Oh, and something about it being linked to the Nile flood and restoring harmony to the land." The boy shrugged. "I know Phoenix found it fascinating. After he heard the story, he kept muttering something about restoring balance and harmony. He was playing with that amulet you both wear and he seemed pretty excited. He never did tell me what he meant."

With a sigh, the boy sat down. Jade put an arm around him, realising he was still feeling bad about 'killing' Phoenix.

"Don't worry, Brynn. He'll get over it."

"I sure hope so," he murmured, "because if he finds out it was me that stabbed him, I don't like my chances of telling my adventures to my grandchildren."

"He won't find out," she squeezed his thin shoulders.

“Jade,” Marcus’ low-voiced warning made her look up. Phoenix stood in the doorway, white-faced and grim. His eyes blazed with anger.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“*Brynn?*” Phoenix’s voice was the merest whisper, his face a mask of hurt and betrayal. He strode into the room. Jade rose and pushed the boy behind her.

“Brynn killed me and you’re protecting him?” Phoenix glared at her. Once more his hand lay, in unspoken threat, on the hilt of his sword.

“What are you going to do, kill *me?*” Jade drew herself up to her full height. She looked him squarely in the eye and prepared to throw a shield spell between them. He took a half-step away, seeming to reconsider. Then he shook his head and snarled back at her, blue eyes fierce as they fought a silent battle of wills, deep in the grip of anger and magic.

The fanatical light in his eye told its own story. Blódbál owned him. Without it, Phoenix would never dream of harming her or Brynn. Now he was under the sway of a fiercer, bloodier magic than hers and only he could break free of it.

“Phoenix, we have a job to do, remember?” Marcus’ calm voice interrupted them and Jade sagged in relief as Phoenix slid a look over at his friend. Outside, night had finally descended and taken the sticky heat of day with it. Perhaps his anger would be soothed if it could be channelled somewhere more useful – like the destruction of a big, chunky obelisk.

Phoenix turned his cold gaze on Marcus. “You’re right. I’ll settle this with *you* later,” he cast a bleak promise at Brynn, who shouldered Jade aside and glared back at him.

“I won’t hide,” the boy raised his chin in defiance. “I’m no coward. I’ll fight you anytime you want. We did the right thing, whether you believe it or not.”

The contrast could not have been more marked. If the situation hadn’t been so very serious, Jade would have laughed. It was like watching a spitting kitten face up to a burly Rottweiler. Brynn clutched at his sword and dagger with white fingers. Phoenix sneered and drew Blódbál a couple of inches free of its covering.

“Enough!” She cast a shield spell between them. Phoenix struggled against it, unable to draw his sword. Before he could turn on her, she grabbed Brynn by the arm and marched him out the door. Then she released the spell. “We’re going to do what we came to do, Phoenix. You can keep this juvenile stupidity up or you can join us. It’s up to you.”

Marcus’ soft tread followed her and, after a few moments, she heard Phoenix’ angry footfall as well. A small knot of tension unwound in her stomach. The crisis had been averted for the moment but Phoenix was poised on a knife edge. They had to work out how to control his connection with Blódbál before it consumed him and he turned on them all.

With a shiver of foreboding, Jade tried to push the thought from her head and concentrate on the job at hand. As they reached the front gate, Heron joined them, excitedly waving a piece of papyrus.

“I’ve got it. Come on,” he almost shoved them out the door in his haste. “I’ll show you exactly where to break it in order to make it fall and cause the least amount of damage.”

She smiled at the old man, glad he was too distracted to notice the tension in the air.

Outside, they had to wait until a few stragglers left the market square. At last it emptied and they moved to the base of the column. Together, they looked up the imposing length of it.

“How big is it?” She whispered, awed by the sheer majesty of the thing. Straining to see in the gathering gloom, she tried reading the hieroglyphs. All she could see for sure was the name of Anuket in large pictographs. This was definitely a Tekhen that glorified her.

"It's seventeen gradii," Heron stated, consulting his notes by the light of the small terracotta lamp he carried.

Brynn and Marcus nodded, still staring at the pointed top of the stone column. Jade and Phoenix exchanged puzzled looks.

"Any idea what a gradii is?" Jade whispered.

"It's about two and a half pedes," Marcus informed them. When she continued to look blankly at him, he held his hands apart to indicate a distance.

"Looks like about three-quarters of a metre, to me," Phoenix estimated. "So if one gradus is about seventy-five centimetres then the obelisk must be roughly....um....thirteen metres high?"

He glanced at Jade for confirmation. She shrugged.

"Math was never my strongest subject. I'll believe you."

Phoenix grinned and she blinked at him, amazed at the speed of his mood change. It was like he'd completely forgotten his anger of moments before.

Behind her, Marcus unhooked Mjölfnir from his belt and hefted it in iron-clad hands.

"I'm not sure I want to give this back," he murmured.

Brynn snickered. "I think Thor might have something to say about it if you kept it."

Marcus nodded to Heron. "Where do I hit it?"

Heron laughed and slapped the stone with an open hand. "You think you can bring down this, with that little thing?"

"I know I can," Marcus' calm was unshaken. "Just tell me where to hit it."

Heron shook his head. He pointed to a spot in the middle of the southern face, about four feet off the ground. "Hit just here as hard as you can then once on the north side about two gradii higher and not quite so hard. It should fall to the south, which is the biggest open area."

Jade grabbed the back of Brynn's shirt and hauled him a safe distance away, ignoring his irritated squawks. Phoenix and Heron joined them shortly after and she cast a protective shield to fend off any flying chunks. Marcus would have to make a dash for it once he'd delivered the blows.

Holding their breath, the little group watched as Marcus swung the hammer a few times. Each time it circled, Jade could see a faint, purple-blue trace in the darkness. Thunder rumbled in the distance and Heron glanced up in surprise.

With one last shoulder rotation, Marcus swung Mjölfnir with all his strength. The head connected in the exact spot Heron had indicated. A spray of stone exploded around it and they heard the *crack* a fraction of a second later. A large section of the tekhen disintegrated. The sound was shocking in the dark, silent square. Marcus ran to the other side and delivered a second strike to that face. Without waiting, he turned and sprinted toward his friends, dashing behind the invisible shield to safety.

Then the inevitable, crumbling collapse of the ancient Egyptian monument began. It started slowly; so slowly it was hard to see in the evening gloom. Only by the snapping and crunching of stone could they tell anything was happening at all.

Brynn yelled, "Look!"

They all stared at the pointed tip of the obelisk, dark against the purple sky. Little by little, it began to lean toward the south. There were a series of loud *cracks* like gunshots. Several chunks of stone dropped out of the bottom, spraying dust and water from the fountain into the air.

The column gathered speed as it arced toward the cobbled ground. Jade quickly realised her *letta* spell had no where near the power needed to stop it or even slow it, so she gave up and just watched. With a creaking groan it whistled through the air, falling with ponderous grace. The tip hit first and snapped off, rebounding into the air before shattering

on the pavement. The rest crashed to ground with the force of an earthquake. The sound reverberated through their chests and feet. Everyone clapped their hands over their ears in reaction. Stone, dust and cobbles flew through the air in all directions, pinging off walls and roofs fifty metres away. Jade's shield spell shook under the impact of dozens of small missiles. Great lumps of rock smashed and bounced off toward the southern end of the square. The Tekhen of Anuket exploded into a thousand pieces of granite.

When the dust cleared a little, she dropped the shield and they hurried forward to inspect the result. Angry, frightened voices sounded as nearby residents questioned each other and tried to find out what was going on. Dozens rushed out of their houses. Holding lanterns, they stopped and stared in shock at the destruction.

Jade and the others ignored all of this. She stood, with narrowed eyes, inspecting the tekhen. Nothing had emerged from it; no Anuket; not even a trapped mouse. Brynn clambered around the shattered stones, possibly looking for hidden goddesses. Phoenix, Marcus and Heron all watched Jade expectantly.

"Is that it?" Brynn called from his perch on top of one large piece. "I mean, I kind of expected an escaping goddess to be a bit more ...y'know...spectacular."

"He's right," Phoenix agreed. "Something should have happened by now. I mean, the release of an imprisoned deity should at least have some sort of lightshow; maybe a personal appearance; even a disembodied voice saying 'thanks' would be enough."

Marcus picked up a piece of rubble and turned it over thoughtfully. "It does seem odd. Are you sure this was the right obelisk?"

"Hey," Phoenix spread out his hands, "don't look at me. Jade's the one with the grey woman in her head telling her what to do. Ask her."

Jade worried at her lip. There was absolutely no magic aura about the obelisk at all. Disappointment fisted in her stomach. Why hadn't she checked it before? Because everyone had been so certain this was the right one that she didn't think to. Closing her eyes, she struggled to recall the exact words spoken to her when she had been between-lives in Asgard.

Oh no. The dismay she felt must have shown on her face.

"What is it?" Marcus asked.

"I've just remembered. The instructions were to 'use the Hammer of Thor to release Anuket from the tekhen that imprisons her'." Jade opened her eyes. "It didn't actually say *which* tekhen she was in – we just *assumed* it would be her own."

"Oh fabulous," Phoenix groaned. "And you said there were how many of these things in Alexandria, Heron?"

"Over a hundred, at least," the old man replied, sounding disheartened.

"So what do we do now?" Phoenix's harsh tone made Jade flinch. "We can hardly smash every one of them."

Brynn appeared at her side and tugged on her sleeve. "I'd say we deal with the nice officer who's just turned up." He pointed across the square at the crowd now gathered around a Roman soldier.

"Oh no," Jade breathed. "Quick, Heron, you get back home and pretend you had nothing to do with this." She gave the old man a push as he began to protest. Next, she turned to Marcus. Yanking out the Hyllion Bagia from beneath her shirt, she nodded to him. "Put Mjölfnir into the Bag, Marcus, we can't have it falling into the hands of the Roman army."

Without argument, he dropped the weapon in then stripped off the iron gloves and belt and dropped them in, too.

“What about Blódbál,” she held out the bag toward Phoenix. “We can’t afford to lose it again.” She held her breath as he stared at her suspiciously. Would he give it up? Was this their chance to separate him from it for awhile?

He glanced over at the lone soldier and shook his head. “I think it’s pretty safe against one soldier.”

She tucked the bag away again. As the officer approached, Marcus stepped forward with a bow and a smile.

Hopeful that Marcus’ charm could divert suspicion, Jade kept half an eye on Phoenix, not sure what sort of mood he was in. He was watching the crowd so she listened briefly to the conversation between Marcus and the soldier. Marcus seemed to have the situation well in hand. He was telling the soldier that they had come out to investigate along with everyone else and had no idea what had caused the obelisk to fall. He sounded very believable; very much the aristocratic Roman.

She stared again at the fallen stone, nibbling her fingertip with worry. A quick glance around showed that Brynn had given up scurrying around the ruins and was now sliding amongst the crowd like a small eel. As she watched, she saw the boy deftly slip something into his pocket before disappearing into the growing crowd.

A growl nearby drew her attention back to Phoenix. He laid a hand on Blódbál’s hilt, his expression darkening into anger.

“Did you see that?” He elbowed Jade.

“What?” She was distracted by a rising swell of conversation at the back of the crowd. Someone new was coming. Someone important by the sounds of it.

“That kid is nothing but trouble,” Phoenix said, sounding bitter. “First he takes one of my lives, now he’s stealing again. We’ve got trouble enough on this quest without his thieving, conniving little ways. Maybe it’s time someone taught that brat a thing or two.”

Before she could stop him, he half-drew the sword. Several people in the crowd shrank back in fear as he stalked away after Brynn. Some of the crowd gasped; a woman screamed; many turned and fled back toward their houses.

Jade called after him twice but he seemed focussed. He didn’t even realise that the crowd weren’t fleeing him, they were running from the newcomer.

“Phoenix!” She ran to his side, dragging at his arm. “There’s trouble. We need your help.”

Phoenix grunted at her. “There sure is. Brynn’s been stealing and I’m about to teach him the lesson of his life.”

She tugged harder at his arm, pulling him around. “No, look!”

The cloud of anger in his eyes seemed to lift for a moment as he saw what she meant. The Roman soldier lay, crumpled and bloody, at Marcus’ feet. Half a dozen black arrows protruded from his back. Standing over the body, Marcus had his hands raised in the traditional sign of surrender.

Facing him in a loose semicircle were twenty men, bristling with swords and weapons. Four carried bows and the knocked arrows were pointed directly at Marcus’ heart. All his captors wore the black robes and blood-red masks of the Priests of Set.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The debris-strewn square emptied almost as fast as it had filled. Nobody wanted to risk an encounter with the soldier-priests of Set. Phoenix and Jade found themselves alone about twenty paces away from where Marcus stood. Phoenix briefly wondered where Brynn was, only to dismiss the boy as a coward for running with the crowd.

He gripped Blódbál's hilt and revelled in the rush of power surging into his body. Gone was the post-poison weakness; gone the fleeting worry he'd felt about facing those toxic blades again. He knew what to expect now. They were no match for Blódbál.

He drew the sword; the sound of metal slickering loud in the tense silence of the night. Two of the priests turned their bows on him. Phoenix smiled as he saw the air before them shimmer faintly purple-blue. Jade had wrapped the archers in a shield spell. He knew she couldn't hold it for long but it gave him the chance to get closer. He pulled out his dagger with his left hand and held it ready.

Marcus must have recognised the signs, too, for he snatched out his sword and ran back to join them. Jade stepped up from behind, her staff ready. The hooded priests began to move closer, trying to surround them. It was time for a battle.

"Don't let their blades touch you," Jade warned in a low voice.

"As if I'd forget *that*," Phoenix growled, feeling a wave of anger at the memory of what Brynn had done; what all three of his supposed friends had done. His muscles clenched. Blódbál became an extension of his arm as the liquid warmth of it invaded his body. Its song soared in his mind. He felt like laughing; like spitting in the faces of these stupid little priests. They had no idea of what he was capable. They would all die - and stay dead.

"Close one eye. I'm going to launch lights at their faces. It might blind them long enough to give us an advantage," Jade murmured. "When I douse the lights, open your eye and you should still be able to see."

Phoenix and Marcus nodded. Seconds later, half a dozen bright green witchlights flew from her fingertips like darts. Arrowing straight toward the priests, they danced in their faces. Flailing hands and swords passed right through them. One of the archers crumpled to the ground; perhaps accidentally struck by his companions.

"Now!" Jade's shout was barely audible over the commotion. The lights snuffed out. Phoenix opened his eye and found he could see. His right eye saw fuzzy blackness but his left was fine. Confusing, yes but he was better off than the priests. With hoarse yell of triumph he sprang into action, Marcus by his side.

Once more he began to blend the circular movements of aikido with the classic swordfighting style his avatar knew. Once more it was devastatingly effective. A priest flung himself at the sound of their voices, his curved sword slicing through the air toward Phoenix's throat. Phoenix spun aside, a deft block redirecting the sword harmlessly past. One quick stab and the man collapsed to the ground with a burbling groan.

A second attacker ran at him, weapon raised high. Phoenix stepped aside again, turned and sliced diagonally down, shearing through bone and sinew like butter. A sword came at him from behind. Blódbál warned him and his dagger hand jumped out to deflect. Again he turned, sliding his short blade along the priests' before twisting it aside and slicing up from below with the sword.

Two advanced more slowly. From his right came the meaty sound of Jade's staff slapping into someone's stomach and the hollow *crack* of a head-strike. On the other, Marcus fought in efficient silence, his sword flashing in the dim light provided by a few distant lamps.

The priests leapt forward. Blódbál's song rang loud in Phoenix's head until he heard nothing else. It sang to him of triumph, of glory, of death and justice. It took his blood and boiled it free of all compassion. It invaded his mind and forged it into steel as hard as its own blade. Then, once it had made its owner into a weapon, it urged him forward into battle. No mercy, it sang; no survivors.

The Priests of Set fell beneath Blódbál's bite. Phoenix danced clear of their tainted blades and laughed in their eerie, masked faces. He spun; sliced; turned; stabbed; killed without thought or hesitation. His mind and soul resounded with Blódbál's triumph at each death and each ending increased its hold over him until he saw the world through a red haze and neither knew nor cared which was friend and which foe.

At last there was only one hooded monk left standing before him. Phoenix raised his arm, almost disappointed that this would be his last. Before he could strike, the priest turned and bolted into the darkness, his booted feet slapping on the cobbles. With a war-cry, Phoenix sprinted after him.

From the gloom, someone yelled and stepped in his way. Phoenix swung Blódbál automatically, aiming to kill so he could continue the chase. To his surprise, the newcomer turned the blow aside with his own blade. Blood afire, Phoenix turned on this fresh enemy with savage delight. Dancing in, he faked an overhead strike then sliced at the knees. Again a blade deflected his. Continuing the momentum, Phoenix turned and slashed again; this time angling up from below. Once more he failed to connect. Blow after blow was spurned and Phoenix felt the anger blossom anew. Nobody could beat him when he held Blódbál. Nobody.

He quickened his strikes; changing direction with incredible speed; turning to leap forward then back; even thrusting without regard for his own vulnerability. Nothing he did could break through the guard of his opponent. Every blow was parried.

Slowly, it dawned on Phoenix that his enemy *was* only blocking, not attacking. Why? It made no sense. There was something not right here. Something tugged at his mind; some feeling of...connection...recognition? The red mist of rage began to slip away, leaving Phoenix feeling cold and more than a little shaky. His swordstrokes slowed and began to waver. His arms sagged; Blódbál weighed a ton. Finally, he stepped back and looked into the dark eyes of his foe for the first time.

Marcus stared back at him, frowning, chest heaving, sword still held ready and dripping blood.

Confused, Phoenix shook his head but the image remained. "Marcus? Was I...was I just fighting *you*?" It didn't seem possible. It couldn't be.

Marcus nodded, watching him with a wary expression, still poised on his toes for quick movement. "The enemy are fled. We should go inside before more Roman soldiers or priests come."

Phoenix agreed absently, wiping his blade and sliding it into its sheath, feeling sick. He stumbled toward Heron's house, his head and heart pounding. He noticed Marcus didn't put his sword away. His stomach lurched at the thought. Marcus didn't trust him.

"Where's Jade?" He mumbled. At least she would still be his friend. It was getting harder and harder to think straight. The last of his berserker strength drained from his limbs, leaving them rubbery and weak.

"She's gone to get Brynn," Marcus replied.

That triggered a memory. "But Brynn was stealing. He ran away."

"No," the Roman sounded harsh, "Brynn knew his swordwork was poor, so he slipped aside, picked up stones and took down three of the archers with his sling. He is no coward."

The full impact of what he had thought and done now slammed in Phoenix's skull like a hammer. He was sickened by his beliefs and actions. Nausea overcame him and he threw up noisily into a potted plant in Heron's courtyard. How could he have thought so badly of Brynn? How could he have been so excited and happy to *kill* people? What had happened to the Phoenix who had been revolted by the thought of killing Roman soldiers back in England? What had he become?

As he stumbled into the dining room, he realised he had become worse even than the person he hated and feared most in the real world – Jacob, his stepfather. Far worse.

At that moment, Jade returned to Heron's house. She looked as troubled as Phoenix felt.

"Where's Brynn?" He looked for the boy as she entered. His tone may have sounded sharper than he intended, for she cast him a quick, assessing, half-scared look that made his heart sink. She didn't trust him, either.

She sank into a chair with a sigh, propping her staff against the table. "Brynn has been captured by the Priests of Set. I went to find him and saw two Priests carrying him away. They were gone before I could catch them or get help. Every spell I threw at them bounced off like water."

Phoenix clenched his jaw as guilt brought fresh bile to his throat. He barely met her eyes. She looked away, as though finding it hard not to blame him. Why not? If he had been in control, they might have been able to save Brynn.

"He's like the little brother I never had," her soft words caught on a half-sob. "He has to be alright, doesn't he?" She looked at Heron and Marcus as if for hope but their faces were grim. Jade closed her eyes and covered her mouth. Phoenix could think of nothing to say. She hadn't looked to him anyway. A rock of self-loathing settled in his stomach.

"So now they have your friend *and* the goddess Anuket was not imprisoned in her own obelisk," Heron stated the obvious with disappointment.

"Yes," Jade murmured, "and, to make matters worse, we're still not sure when the 'death of the moon' deadline is to release Anuket and now the priests of Set know where we are. We can't stay here much longer or we'll put you in danger, too, Heron."

The old man waved her objection away. "Don't be silly, child. They won't be back tonight. The square is swarming with Roman soldiers. Right now we need to decide what your next course of action should be. You obviously need to rescue Brynn and complete your mission."

When they didn't reply, Heron patted Jade on the shoulder. "We're all tired and hungry. I'll send for food and my maps of the city. Perhaps a little time and thought will reveal a plan."

For awhile, as they ate, they tossed around various ideas: which obelisk Anuket might really be in; how to rescue Brynn; how to deal with the priests of Set. Phoenix contributed nothing. He had nothing worth hearing. He stared at his sword where it lay on the table. Finally, Marcus' voice pulled him back from his own fruitless, guilt-ridden thoughts.

"Jade," the Roman mused, "are you sure you put that illusion spell on us? Are you certain Zhudai cannot Farsee us?"

Jade blinked and sent him an anxious glance. "Of course. I even put it on Heron, just in case. Why?"

"I'm just trying to understand how the Priests of Set knew to find us here." He shook his dark head and frowned. "It doesn't make sense."

"Ah...um...yes," Heron raised one thin hand, looking sheepish. "I'm afraid that may have been my fault."

"How?" Jade and Marcus looked at the old man in surprise.

“Well,” the old inventor grimaced, “when I went to see the Proconsul, I did mention that I *might* have found evidence of the Phoenix legend. I said I had brought it home for further study. It’s quite possible that Proconsul Priscus’ chief advisor overheard my comments. Court gossip says he is close to the High Priests of Set and was actively against my research trip to Memphis. It’s most likely that he sent the Priests to destroy my evidence and they just arrived at the wrong time.”

Jade closed her eyes. Phoenix could see she was struggling to maintain calm and patience but at least she was succeeding.

He tried to make sense of everything; to connect all the threads and understand what was going on. Weariness blurred his thinking like wet paint running together on a canvas. He couldn’t see the big picture any longer and the details didn’t even make sense.

A sigh from Jade caught his wandering attention again. She pulled out her herb bag and selected some fresh leaves she must have picked from the housekeepers’ garden.

Marcus frowned at her. “You don’t need herbs. If you rely too much on them, you won’t ever know your own strength.”

She grimaced. “It’s just barley grass for energy. I’m tired. Stop fussing”

He eyed her steadily, his mouth pressed thin. Phoenix found the hint of disharmony between them worrying.

“Let’s forget about how the priests found us and concentrate first on how we’re going to save Brynn then find whatever tekhen Anuket is really being held in and destroy it before the deadline,” she finally said but her voice betrayed her uncertainty.

Phoenix surfaced back into full alertness feeling like someone had called his name. He sat quietly, listening but no-one spoke. His body felt like he’d been pounded all over with a big, heavy pillow. He wanted to sleep but something unresolved nagged at the back of his mind.

With an effort, he recalled the events of the evening: his anger with Brynn; the destruction of the tekhen with no release of Anuket; sickening memories of the battle with the priests of Set; his clash with Marcus; Brynn’s capture. It had not been a good night.

Automatically, he reached for Blódbál then hesitated with his hand still inches away from the hilt. He could almost *hear* it calling him; urging him to join with it; cajoling him with battle images and promises of glory. His hand moved closer of its own accord. The urge to strap it onto his hip was almost unbearable. With a shudder, Phoenix pulled back from it.

He couldn’t be trusted with this weapon. Jade was right. It was beyond his control. He couldn’t be the hero it wanted because *his* notion of a true hero wasn’t a bloodthirsty berserker. A true hero walked away from a fight and didn’t kill unless it was absolutely necessary; a true hero certainly didn’t turn on his friends.

Looking around, he saw Jade sitting with her eyes closed again while Marcus and Heron watched her. The faint frown on Marcus’ face told Phoenix exactly how hard Jade had been pushing herself. Brynn was captured by the enemy and she was trying to fix everything on her own. Phoenix closed his own eyes. He had let all three of his companions down with his weakness. Now it was time he made up for it. As he watched, Jade ran a hand through her long, white-blond hair and sighed heavily.

“I just get the feeling we’re missing something obvious – some connection between everything I can’t quite see.”

In that moment, Phoenix finally joined up the dots and almost kicked himself for his own stupidity. He sat up straight. Jade exchanged wary looks with Marcus. The Roman boy had tensed at Phoenix’s movement. His hand now rested on his sword. Phoenix tried to ignore it but the thought that Marcus felt threatened was painful. He put it aside. There were other issues to deal with first.

He drew a deep breath. Swiftly, he explained to Jade the revelation he'd had in Set's prison – that their job in each quest was not just to complete the task but to restore Balance and Harmony in each place.

Next, he apologised to Marcus for turning on him and assured him it would never, ever happen again. The Roman bowed stiffly but it was clear he wasn't ready to believe Phoenix's promises. It hurt but he could understand Marcus' hesitation. As long as Blódbál remained in his hands, he was dangerous to his own friends.

Finally, he slid the sword toward Jade. "Put it in the bag. I won't use it unless we have no choice."

The group was silent awhile then Jade touched his hand with a tentative smile. "Thankyou. I'll keep it safe." She pulled out the Hyllion Bagia and pushed Blódbál into its inky depths, taking care to touch only the leather hilt with the tips of her fingers.

He had to bite his tongue to stop a cry of protest. Even from within the Bag he could feel its seductive pull. It took all his strength not to demand it back; not to cradle it to his chest and reassure it he would carry it until his death. The looks of relief on his friends' faces weren't even enough to make him feel better. It was like losing an arm.

With an effort, Phoenix wrenched his thoughts back on track and looked at each of his friends in turn.

"I know where Anuket has to be. She's got to be in the Tekhen of Set – the God of chaos and disease; the god who benefits most from her absence. We have to destroy the Tekhen of Set and I'm guessing it will be protected - inside the grounds of the Temple of Set, here in Alexandria."

Heron nodded in agreement, so Phoenix continued. "Then, since that's where Brynn will be, too, I guess our next destination is the Temple of Set. We should get some sleep now and take on the Priests of Set tomorrow, when we're fresh."

"I don't think you'll have time to sleep, my friends," Heron shook his head sadly.

"Why?" Jade turned anxious green eyes on him.

"I think your deadline is tonight. You mentioned the 'death of the moon'. Well, tonight is considered to be the first night of the dying moon - the last quarter is beginning," Heron looked at them straitly. "Just before dawn on this night, each month, every prisoner in the cells of the Temple is sacrificed to Set in the Rite of Burning. If you don't save Brynn, his soul will be condemned to the worst afterlife he believes in - forever."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In one swift move, Phoenix stood up and pushed the remains of their scanty meal to one side. He snatched up the maps of Alexandria that Heron had sent for and spread them out on the dining table.

“Heron’s right. It’s too much of a co-incidence that this night is sacred to the Set priests *and* Brynn is taken by them *and* I’m sure they’ve been working deliberately to stop us releasing Anuket. We’ve run out of time. It’s tonight. Heron, show me where the Temple is,” he demanded.

Heron pointed at a spot on the western edge of the harbour. “It’s in the Rhakotis, the area of town where most of the Egyptian population live.”

“And how can we gain access to it?” Marcus frowned over the map, tracing the streets with one finger. The Temple was bounded on the north by the harbour, on the west by a canal and on the east by a large, open square. On the southern side was another courtyard, onto which the main front doors opened. It would be difficult to approach unseen from any direction.

“You can’t,” Heron shook his head. “There is no access to the public at any time and the entrances are all well-guarded. I’ve only been in there once – when I was installing door openers for the front doors. The place is impregnable. The walls are eight gradii high and there are over a hundred priest-warriors in the building.”

They were silent awhile, pondering the maps without any brilliant ideas emerging.

Phoenix scrubbed his fingers through his hair. “It’s no use. We need to see the place before we can come up with anything solid. We’ll have to go there now and come up with something on the spot.”

Jade grimaced. “I hate to go in blind but I think you’re right. Let’s gather whatever gear we might need and put it in the Bag. Quickly. It’s almost midnight already.”

“The city is under curfew,” Heron reminded them. “There will be soldiers patrolling.”

“We’ll just have to avoid them, won’t we?” Phoenix folded the map and tucked it away in his shirt. It was time to get moving.

A short time later the four crept from shadow to shadow, through the centre of the city. Heron had insisted on coming and they couldn’t refuse. His knowledge of the city was invaluable, even if his skill in sneaking wasn’t the best. The streets were poorly lit by smoky torches that hung in sconces from stone walled buildings but the waning moon had risen and was casting a feeble silver light. For a city under curfew, the streets were extremely busy. Soldiers patrolled in pairs and city firemen made random checks on torches and households to ensure household fires were safely contained. It made hiding very tricky.

As they neared the Harbour, their pace slowed. This was the centre of town and better lit than the outer suburbs. Large, stone buildings loomed high into the night sky. Smaller ones, housing small businesses, were shuttered and closed for the night. They could smell the ocean and hear the distant slosh of waves against the harbour walls.

Feeling nervous without his sword, Phoenix nudged Jade. “You’ve definitely got all our weapons in the Bag then?”

“Yes,” Jade nodded. “Heron said that if we’re found by the Romans, we’ll have a better chance if we’re unarmed - but I should be able to get out a weapon or two if something goes pear-shaped.”

“Good,” Phoenix shoved his hands into the pockets of his breeches. He felt the tug of Blódbál’s power and knew it was close by. The idea was both reassuring and scary.

Jade paused and turned apprehensive green eyes on him. Her hand crept to the front of her shirt and held it closed. “You want Blódbál back, don’t you?”

Phoenix clenched his jaw. He’d been trying to think about something else but she was right. Underneath everything was a burning ache to have that sword back in his grasp.

“Well, don’t give it to me, if you want to survive this game,” he gave a rough laugh, trying to turn it into a joke.

There was an awkward pause as they began walking again and Jade stayed silent. She still held her shirt and the Hyllion Bagia beneath it. At last, she spoke softly again.

“I don’t blame you for being afraid of the sword, you’re pretty scary when you’re in berserker mode.”

Phoenix jerked a shoulder, trying to ignore the urge to yell at her. He wasn’t scared of Blodbal – well, ok he was - more than anything, he wanted it *back*.

“But,” she glanced around at the shadowed streets, “I don’t think you’ll be able to avoid using it. You’re going to have to learn to control it, Phoenix.”

He grunted, hoping she’d take it for agreement. Truth was: he didn’t have a hope of controlling the sword. That was the only part that did frighten him.

“Oh!” Jade stopped and Phoenix looked wildly around, wondering what was wrong. He followed her rapt gaze and saw....a big building. It was a nice, impressive, stone building with fluted columns and artistic sculptures on the walls but still, just a building.

“It’s the Library of Alexandria,” Jade whispered in awe. “It was *the* centre of learning and culture for hundreds of years before it burnt down and all the books were lost forever.”

“You’ve gone all gooey over a *library*?” He groaned.

“And look,” Jade pointed off toward the north to where, just past the Library, he could just make out a large harbour, surrounded on three sides by torch-lit buildings. Dozens of small and large boats were moored close together on the dark water, bobbing gently in the swell. It was a pretty scene but hardly worth staring at in wonder.

“So what, it’s the ocean,” he grabbed her arm and pulled her along in the wake of the others.

“No, it’s the Lighthouse,” she breathed.

Phoenix could even hear the capital L.

“What, that light out there?” There appeared to be a fire burning high up and out to sea – probably on an island or spit. In the faint moonlight, he couldn’t see much of the building but he assumed that was what she meant. “Whoopee, so it’s a lighthouse. You’ll probably even get to see it closer if you hurry. The Temple is right on the harbour.”

Jade shook her arm free and sent him an irritated look. “The Great Lighthouse was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient world. Don’t you even care how they built it over a hundred and thirty metres high, or how they generated the light without electricity?”

Phoenix glanced sideways at her and shook his head. He didn’t want to hurt her feelings by saying flat out, ‘no’ but they really did have more important things to be doing than drooling over old buildings. Where on earth did she store all this information? Just when he thought he was getting the hang of being her friend, she went off into her own head and spouted trivia.

Her expression changed to regret and she sighed. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Brynn is more important than a stupid lighthouse or some two thousand year old books. Let’s go.”

Phoenix was still in shock at her admission when they caught up with Marcus and Heron at the waterfront. He was only half-listening as they joined the two Romans – until he heard a name come up in conversation which surprised him to a standstill. Heron said the name “Zhudai”.

Phoenix grabbed the old man’s arm, spinning him about with rough disregard for his age. “What did you say?”

Heron blinked at him. "I was just telling Marcus that the Proconsul's advisor, Feng Zhudai, is also reputed to be a close confidante of the High Priest of Set – which is probably how they found you at my house."

Phoenix let go and paced back and forward. "So that's how it all ties together. I was wondering where Zhudai fit into all this. If he's in league with Set then of course he'll want to stop us from freeing Anuket. Releasing her would undo all his plans by restoring Balance to Egypt." He smacked his own forehead. "Why didn't I see it before?"

Heron interrupted. "How do you know Zhudai? And how does he know you? Why would he want to stop you from freeing Anuket?"

Phoenix scrubbed a hand through his hair. "It's a long story. Basically, Zhudai's the ultimate badguy we're supposed to foil. Everywhere we go, he keeps popping up as someone's advisor and trying to stop us from fulfilling our quest. I'm darned if I know how he does it, either."

"Well, he is a powerful sorcerer," Jade reminded him, tilting her head as she watched the streets for signs of patrols.

"Is he?" Heron seemed surprised. "Proconsul Priscus is well-known for his hatred of sorcerers and Zhudai has been at court for many months without any signs of magic."

"How does he *do* that?" Phoenix felt frustration welling up in his guts again. "How can Zhudai be the advisor to Agricola, Loki *and* Priscus all at once? And, for that matter, how did Zhudai get here from Sweden so fast?"

"Oh!" Jade gave him a wide-eyed look. "He must know about the portals."

Phoenix thought about it for a moment then shook his head. "How could he? If he was using the portals to get around, he would have ended up Snefru's chapel like we did."

"Unless there's another one somewhere here, in Alexandria," she exclaimed. "Heron, do you know of a group of three stones somewhere around? They'd be shaped like a big doorway and made of grey rock different from anything you'd normally see in Egypt. They could be set into a wall or standing on their own somewhere."

The old inventor looked off into the distance, thinking hard. Finally, he shook his head. "I don't believe I've seen anything like that and I've been into most of the major buildings. Of course, if it's in a private home I wouldn't know."

"When you say 'most' of the major buildings," Phoenix mused as an unwelcome thought intruded, "which ones *haven't* you been into?"

"Well, the only place I've actually been *denied* access is, of course, the Temple of Set," Heron sounded mildly annoyed. "They really are most unpleasant fellows. Most of the recent riots we've had have been because the priests of Set have stirred up trouble between the Jews, the Romans and native people. When I was installing the door-openers, they wouldn't even let me past the front doors of the Temple. I only wanted to see the statue of....oh....I see what you mean. Your portal could be there...." He trailed off.

Phoenix looked at Jade then they both turned to see what Marcus thought.

The Roman nodded. "So everything hinges on the Temple of Set then."

"And I have a feeling we're going to need a serious plan," Phoenix agreed. "Thinking with my sword arm won't get us what we need this time. Jade?" He looked at her and she blinked back at him in alarm.

Then she sighed, accepting her part in the team. "We'll still need to see the temple. Somehow I don't think the 'concubine' trick we pulled last time will work. They will have been warned by the temple in Memphis by now."

For awhile they were all silent, following Heron west along the harbour wall, listening to the gentle slap of waves against the rocky shore. Before long they had left the brightly-lit centre of Alexandria and were in a dark, unpleasant area of town.

“Why do they build the Temples of Set in such nasty parts of town?” Jade whispered as they crept along the rubbish-strewn harbour-front and crouched behind the rotting carcass of an old rowboat. There was definitely something, or someone, dead around. A rat squeaked and scurried away. Jade shuddered and held her breath.

“This used to be a nice area,” Heron said with soft regret. “Something about the unholy practices of the Priesthood draws the worst elements and repels ordinary citizens.”

Finally, they came up against a high, wooden fence that blocked their path and ran down to the water’s edge. Peering through a gap in the palings, Heron pointed across the open square beyond, toward the imposing facade of the Temple of Set. Its massive walls dominated the area, dwarfing the decaying remains of old mansions nearby. Ten armed monks paced along its length, guarding the high, stone walls. More walked the boundary marked by the wooden fence. Surrounded by high, smooth walls, the Temple itself loomed, dark and forbidding, against the star-speckled sky. A lone, greenish light shone in its highest tower.

“First of all, we have to get around this fence and inside the compound,” Phoenix whispered. “Then we need to find a way inside the temple walls.”

“The fence goes all the way down to the water and it’s guarded on the landward side,” Heron hissed, eyeing the glittering black sea with distaste.

“You’re right,” Phoenix noted. “Jade, I don’t suppose you’ve got a handy spell for drying clothes, do you?”

She thought for a moment before nodding. “Ummm, actually, I think I do have one that would suit. What’s the plan?”

“I was thinking that we should slip into the sea and swim around the fence then sneak up under that,” he indicated a small jetty poking out into the harbour. There looked to be just enough room to hide on the rocky beach beneath it, out of sight of the guards.

Jade sent him an admiring glance. “Nice.” Behind them, Marcus murmured agreement and Phoenix felt a rush of pride and gratitude. Maybe they were getting closer to working like a real team – if he could control his connection with his sword and think clearly.

Heron raised a hand. “I am sorry to cause trouble but I can’t swim.”

“Ah,” Phoenix said, stumped. “I hadn’t thought of that. Ummm.”

“I can tow him,” Marcus said. “Take off your shoes and most your clothes so they don’t weigh you down.”

“We should all do that,” Jade chimed in. “We can put them in the Bag so we don’t have to carry them.”

“Let’s do it then,” Phoenix began to strip off his shirt. “The sooner we get ashore and get to the Temple, the more chance we have of saving Brynn.”

As they picked their way carefully down to the water, Phoenix glanced back over his shoulder at the Temple. The fence angled down here and the roofline of the temple was clearly visible.

“Look!” He whispered to Jade. She looked up and her expression sharpened into anxiety, her face pale and set. There, just poking out behind the roof of the temple, was the distinctive, pointed silhouette of an obelisk. Behind them, the dying moon drifted in the night sky, creating a silvery path across the harbour, directly toward the Temple of Set. They were running out of time.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Phoenix's plan went surprisingly well. They all slipped into the water, hidden by the very fence that was supposed to keep them out. Heron panicked for a moment until Jade firmly told him the seawater was warm and calm and to stop behaving like a baby. He glowered as Marcus wrapped an arm around him and began a smooth sidestroke. They moved slowly, keeping their heads low to reduce ripples on the flat night ocean. The final few metres were in full view of the temple guards and had to be done underwater. Heron came up beneath the dock sputtering and coughing until Marcus shushed him by placing a hand over his mouth. The old inventor looked extremely unhappy. His white beard and hair were bedraggled; his skinny, wrinkled body white and dripping.

"Now I know why I never learned," he muttered, wringing out his beard.

Jade cast her spell to dry off the scant clothing they wore then pulled their other things out of the Bag. They were saturated. Surprised and obviously annoyed, she had to dry them as well. Shaking her head in puzzlement, she asked Marcus to remind her later to check out the other things they had stowed in the bag. He nodded, watching for patrols or signs that they had been detected.

Phoenix turned to Jade. "You're going to have to give me my sword." His heart raced with reluctance and excitement. His hand itched to hold Blódbál once more even while he feared to do so.

Her expression was uneasy. "Will you be able to control it?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I'm not angry at you or Brynn any more, so I don't *think* it will turn me against you again. I just don't know. You'll have to watch me."

"Maybe you could just use your old sword," she offered.

He shook his head, dismayed by the surge of resentment he felt at her words. "Brynn had it. Besides, with the High Priest and Zhudai both lurking about, I don't think an ordinary sword will cut it – if you'll forgive the pun. In fact, I think Marcus had better have Mjölfnir ready, too, just in case we get a chance to knock down the tekhen on our way through."

Marcus nodded, his eyes fixed on Phoenix. Jade pulled out her staff and dagger before offering the Bag to Marcus. He drew out his bow, dagger and sword before retrieving Thor's hammer along with the iron gloves and belt that allowed him to heft its great weight. Jade dried them off.

"I hope the gloves don't go rusty or Thor may get a little irritated when we give them back," Marcus murmured as he drew them on and flexed his fingers.

"I still don't understand why everything's wet," Jade complained again.

Phoenix suppressed the urge to tell her to shut up and just give him the sword. She slid it out of the bag and dried it before handing it to him with obvious reluctance. With their hands on their own weapons, his friends watched him as he strapped the blade to his hip and closed his eyes.

It was like taking a drink after a day in the desert. He felt complete again; clear-headed and full of energy. The low-grade pulse of Blódbál's eagerness burned like a banked fire just waiting to be stoked back to life. Opening his eyes, Phoenix found his friends still watching him.

"It's ok," Their caution was irritating. "I'm fine. Let's work on a plan of attack. We need some distraction so we can get into the Temple of Set without having to fight our way in from the start."

Clearly encouraged by his lack of desire to attack them, they relaxed and began to toss ideas around.

Ten minutes later, they were no closer to a solution. It seemed impossible. Hidden beneath the rotting old dock, they could now see the open square and there was no way to cross it unseen. Phoenix suggested Jade use her illusion or command spell to distract the guards. She argued that there were just too many guards and too much distance to run without cover. Then, even if they did make it to the walls, they had no way of getting inside.

At a loss for a solution, they fell silent. Jade pulled out a packet of nuts and dried fruits, drying them before handing them around. As they nibbled and watched the temple, they listened to Heron complaining about the Priests of Set and state of the city.

"It's getting worse, too," Heron sighed. "The drought has brought great hardship, food shortages and diseases. Priscus has been taking every able-bodied slave for the Games in Rome. The priests of Set walk among the Egyptians, blaming the Romans for every problem. Then they take their poisonous words to the Jewish quarter and stir them against the Romans and Christians. Everywhere they go, riots and death follow. The Proconsul is holding onto his rule by the merest thread. Nobody can understand why he listens so closely to Zhudai and the High Priest of Set. If something is not done soon, I fear the whole city will go up in flames."

Phoenix, Jade and Marcus exchanged wondering looks as the same idea occurred to all of them at once.

"Have we still got those priests' robes from Memphis?" Phoenix asked Jade.

Jade nodded. "I think they ended up in the Bag." Fishing around, she drew out two, soggy black robes and quickly dried them.

"What about those red masks they wear?" Phoenix asked.

Heron shook his head. "Only the Inner Circle of Fifty wears the Blood Mask. All the other priests go bare-faced."

"Excellent." Phoenix looked at the old man. "Do you think you could pass for a priest of Set and say what they say?"

Heron frowned then nodded. "I suppose; I've heard their rantings often enough. What are you planning?"

Phoenix grinned. "I think we need to cause a riot."

Heron gasped, choking on a raisin until Marcus thumped him on the back.

"So," Phoenix summed up moments later as Marcus and Heron struggled into the robes, "the idea is for Marcus and Heron to go drum up some people to mill around outside the temple as a distraction."

Everyone nodded.

"But how does that help us actually get in?" Marcus asked.

"I hadn't quite worked that out yet," Phoenix admitted. "I was hoping a riot would kind of give us an opportunity to slip in."

Jade groaned. "We can't just *hope* a chance will come up, Phoenix! Remember that the guards in Memphis had a special knock? We don't know the one they use here?"

Phoenix swore. "So even if we did distract the guards with a riot, the doorkeeper wouldn't let us in. Come on everyone...think. We need a way in."

Marcus knelt down with his back to the ocean and gazed up at the old buildings surrounding the Temple. Fluted stone and intricate Roman friezes rubbed elbows with sphinxes and hieroglyphs. He nudged Heron. The old man sat down with a crackling of knee joints and a relieved groan.

"Was this part of town Roman-built or Greek?" Marcus asked.

Phoenix blinked at his friend in bewilderment. "Is this an appropriate time to be admiring the architecture?"

Marcus sent him a level look and returned his gaze to Heron, who considered the question.

"I do believe that the Greeks built the original Rhakotis area but that this particular part was rebuilt after it was destroyed when the Romans took over. The more affluent Egyptians wanted to copy our Roman style housing. Why?"

"One thing we Romans are very good at is drainage." Marcus remarked. He stood up and brushed off his knees, gazing west along the rocky shoreline.

"First architecture, now drains?" Phoenix threw up his hands and caught Jade's eye. He circled his temple with a fingertip and mouthed, 'crazy' at her. She grimaced at him and shook her head. She was right, of course. Marcus was anything but crazy. Intelligent, methodical, patient; yes. Crazy; no. If he had an idea, it would be worth listening to.

Heron now scrambled to his feet, his lined face alight with understanding. "Yes, you're right of course. This was all low lying land and needs excellent drainage in the flood season. It should be this way," he pointed west and hurried away with his monk's robe flapping around his ankles as he crouched below the guards' line of sight. Marcus followed leaving Jade and Phoenix to trail along feeling lost.

"Any idea what they're on about?" Phoenix murmured.

"Nope," Jade shrugged. "But Heron's a genius and Marcus has never let us down yet, so I'm willing to give it a chance. Besides, I couldn't think of anything. All I can think about is poor Brynn. That horrible chanting and screaming we heard back in Memphis...."

Phoenix laid a hand on her arm as her voice trailed away. "It'll be ok," he reassured her. "Brynn will be fine. We'll save him, I promise."

She bit her lip and nodded but he could see that his promise didn't really help. Unless they found a way in soon it would be too late and they both knew it.

Their thighs were burning by the time they arrived at a corner of the harbour wall. The Temple walls rose steeply above, hiding even the feeble moonlight. Jade refused to light any witchlights so close to enemy territory, so Phoenix almost bumped into Marcus. He and Heron were gazing with satisfaction at the mouth of a canal that emptied into the ocean. It held just a few feet of sludgy, stinking mud and debris-laden dirty water that reeked of sewage and swamp.

Phoenix gargled and blinked as his eyes began to water and the smell caught in the back of his throat.

"There's your entrance," Marcus nodded at the canal.

Phoenix shook his head. "That doesn't go into the temple, it's an open canal."

"No," Heron agreed, "but *that* does." He pointed at a man-sized, arched opening in the brick side of the canal. "All the sewers and storm drains around here empty into the canals. This one should lead you almost straight under the walls and into the temple."

"You *have* to be kidding," Jade moaned. "Please tell me we don't have to wade through sewage to get there."

Marcus raised one eyebrow at her and smiled slyly. He pointed to himself and Heron. "We don't. You and Phoenix do. At least, you do if you want to get in and save Brynn."

She sighed. Phoenix suppressed a grin. He figured she would do pretty much anything to save that brat and Marcus knew it.

"So," Phoenix wanted to make sure he had it clear. "You and Heron go stir up a decent riot by posing as Set priests while we find a place to lay low in the temple?"

Marcus nodded. "We'll walk south along the canal and come out in the Rakhotis sector. It will be easier to start our riot there, as the Roman patrols avoid that section at night and don't enforce the curfew. As soon as you hear a disturbance outside, open the doors for us."

Heron spread his thin, white hands. "When you open the doors we'll lead a swarm of rioters inside. That should occupy the monks and give you a chance to find Brynn, the stone door and destroy the Tekhen of Set."

“Why can’t we just all go in this way?” Jade asked, frowning. “I don’t like separating. We’re stronger as a team.”

“My dear girl,” Heron said, pity in his eyes, “you are all formidable fighters but remember: there are over a hundred monk-warriors in that temple. Zhudai and the High Priest will have them on full alert. You can’t possibly save your friend *and* destroy the obelisk without some assistance. Ah... that reminds me.” He pulled Jade aside and murmured into her ear.

Intent on his destination, Phoenix ignored the inventor and gripped Marcus’ arm. “Good luck.”

“Give us an hour,” Marcus returned his clasp. “If you haven’t heard any noise outside by then you can assume we’ve been captured or the riot has been quelled by the Roman patrols. If that’s the case, you’ll have to try to save Brynn without us. In fact,” he unhooked Mjölfnir from his belt and hefted it thoughtfully, “*you’d* better take this in case you need to destroy the obelisk. You probably won’t get a second chance to get inside the Temple.”

Stepping away from Heron, Jade fished the Bag out from beneath her shirt, slid her own staff into it then held it open to Marcus. He dropped the hammer and gloves back into its black depths with a sigh of regret. Jade gave him a swift, tight hug then did the same for Heron. Phoenix frowned. It was worrying to think of how Marcus would fare if he were captured. He and Brynn had come to mean so much in such a short time. He didn’t blame Jade for looking frightened as Marcus turned away.

Catching her eye, Phoenix raised an eyebrow. Jade swallowed, squared her shoulders and clambered down the steep, brick sides of the canal. He followed. When they reached the bottom and stepped gingerly into the mouth of the tunnel, he almost gagged at the smell. The stench of human waste, dead things and swampwater made him dry retch and cover his mouth.

He glanced at Jade, secretly glad to see she seemed just as affected by the smell. His mouth filled with saliva as he tried desperately not to throw up.

“Can you do anything about this smell?” He coughed. “Cast a cleansing spell up the tunnel like you did in the tomb, maybe?”

Jade frowned, blinking as raw methane rushed out and made their eyes water again. “Wouldn’t work – there’s too much stuff decaying too fast. It would just come straight back again. But if I...” She tilted her head, a sure sign that she was thinking hard.

He waited as patiently as he could. There was no way they could breathe the air in this tunnel for long. A dead dog floated past in the canal, its body bloated, hairless and grey. Phoenix gulped and looked away.

“Got it!” She exclaimed. “Hold still.”

He did as ordered. She wove her hands in a sphere shape around his head, muttering as she did. There was a flash of purple-blue from her fingertips. The world swirled and warped before his eyes before settling back into almost normality. Everything looked faintly bluish but nothing too weird. He drew a quick test breath. The air smelled perfectly good.

“Cool,” he grinned. His words bounced back with a faint echo. “This must be what a goldfish feels like. What’d you do?”

Jade finished working on her own head and smiled at him. Her face looked slightly distorted – as though she was looking through the bottom of a glass bowl. “It’s a shield spell combined with the air cleansing one. It means that only air molecules can come through the shield, rather than methane gas and scent ones.” Her voice sounded tinny and distant.

“Wow,” he was genuinely impressed. “How’d you think of that?”

She shrugged but he could tell she was pleased by his approval. “Sometimes it helps having a modern education to go with this magic stuff. Means I can use it in ways people here haven’t thought of yet.”

They began to move into the dark tunnel, stepping with care on the slimy bricks. Luckily, there was only a trickle of water in the bottom, so their feet weren’t soaked in the stuff. Jade sent a few witchlights ahead but neither of them was keen to see *everything* they were walking through. There were some things you were better off not knowing, Phoenix reasoned. He shook his head and tried to concentrate on counting.

He’d estimated the distance from the canal to the temple itself at about a hundred metres. As he walked, he stretched his steps a little to cover what he thought was about a metre with each stride. Counting, he stopped and looked up when he reached a hundred.

“This should be it. Any tunnels leading off to the right from now on should be coming from inside the Temple of Set.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jade nodded her understanding and peered into the gloom ahead. “There,” she pointed. About twenty steps away was a smaller, black opening leading into a drainage pipe about half the size of the tunnel. Splashing over, the pair leaned down and looked hopefully into the opening. Not surprisingly, it was pitch black.

She cocked her head, frowning. “I hear something,” she whispered.

Phoenix strained his ears but all he could hear was his own breathing and the gurgle of turbid water.

“It sounds like chanting – the same sort we heard in Memphis,” she said. Her eyes were huge in the darkness. “I hope it doesn’t mean they’re about to start the sacrifices.”

“At least we know it’s the right drain,” he reminded her. “Let’s not waste any more time.”

They both looked down at the floor of the tunnel. In the faint light of Jade’s witchlights, it was an unwholesome green and caked with filth and algae. A steady stream of putrid water flowed out of it, occasionally carrying nasty brown lumps. The roof was too low to stand under, even if they bent over. If they wanted to go on, they would have to crawl.

Jade gulped and looked at her hands. “I’m going to pretend I’ve never heard of bacteria.”

Phoenix grimaced and got down on his knees at the mouth of the tunnel. “If it turns out Brynn has been sacrificed after we’ve gone through all this, I’ll kill him.”

“Ha, ha,” she replied, giving him a shove in the back to get him moving. “Don’t even joke about Brynn being sacrificed. We *have* to get there in time. He’s our chosen Companion. We can’t lose him now.”

He nodded and began crawling, trying to ignore the sickening sliminess beneath his fingers. “I know what you mean. Brynn may only be a game character but he’s like a kid brother.”

There was a brief pause then Jade spoke again. “How many brothers or sisters do you have – in the real world?”

He had to stop and think for a moment to separate his character’s memories from his own. It was getting harder to do the longer he spent in this realm. His avatar had been brought up in a big family of eight and he remembered all the warmth and bickerings of having siblings. It contrasted sharply with Phoenix’s own life, making it seem lonely by comparison.

“I’m an only child,” he said.

“I have six older sisters in the real world,” she returned with a hint of both bitterness and longing in her voice. “In this one I’m an only child, so I guess I kind of know how you feel.”

Phoenix thought about his real father, years dead, and his unloving stepfather. Anger and hurt welled up in his heart again. At his hip, he felt Blódbál react to the emotion, trying to find a way into his head again through it. Grimly, he shut the feelings out. He couldn’t afford to feel if he wanted to stay in control. He didn’t have to reply to her comments, as they came to a junction at that moment.

The tunnel continued straight but another intersected it from the left. He paused, listening hard. Beside him, Jade pointed to the left and he nodded in agreement. She took the lead this time. The chanting echoed faintly from that direction. It was their only certain link to the temple. The other direction could lead closer to the door but it might also lead somewhere outside the grounds and they couldn’t afford to waste time checking.

Another ten metres or so brought them underneath what looked like a drain-hole of some sort. They say silently beneath its pale light for a few moments, listening. Eventually, Jade must have identified some of the noises. She turned to Phoenix and mouthed 'kitchen'. He nodded and indicated they should keep moving. A kitchen was far too busy to sneak in and out of.

A few more seconds crawling revealed an extremely unpleasant scene indeed. Ahead of him, Jade stopped abruptly and reared back with her hands up. He peered around her and was suddenly indescribably glad of the shield spell protecting his nose. Overhead, a series of small holes sent shafts of light down to expose several, sloppy, putrid mounds of human waste piled on the tunnel floor.

He looked up, realising what the openings above must be. They had found the toilets. He closed his eyes briefly, wondering how on earth he had got into this situation. Brynn had better be really, really frigging grateful.

When he opened his eyes, he found Jade examining the underside of the toilet seats. She reached up and cautiously pushed. The holes were cut into slabs of timber that were hinged in some fashion. It was probably to allow the facilities to be cleaned, although it didn't look like the cleaners did a very good job of it. Still, it meant they could get out of this gross place. Phoenix nodded when she glanced down at him.

She whispered something and listened hard. He guessed she was listening for people coming in to use the room. Well, if someone did, they'd get the fright of their lives.

With the coast evidently clear, she pushed the lid all the way open and grabbed the edges of the seat. Grunting, she pulled herself up and scrambled out of the way. Phoenix followed her.

Then they were standing in a plain, white-walled room with the row of toilet-holes in a raised bench along one side of the room and a long trough with constant trickle of water flowing along the other. There weren't any cubicles or mirrors and there didn't even appear to be any toilet paper. Phoenix tried hard not to wonder how they cleaned their backsides.

With obvious satisfaction, Jade cast a cleansing spell on their entire bodies, twice. Dirt and filth vanished from his hands and knees but he wouldn't feel clean for a week, even if he bathed twice a day. Next, she dropped the spell around their heads. Phoenix sniffed his hands. Clean. It was a relief, especially when he got a whiff of the bathroom itself.

He decided they were taking too big a risk if they lingered any longer in such a high-traffic, nasty-smelling place. He pushed the bathroom door open a fraction and peered out. The hall outside was empty.

"That was possibly the most disgusting thing I've ever seen," Jade whispered in his ear. She pulled her staff out of the Bag and gripped it. "Let's get out of here and find a place to hide somewhere near the front door."

"What about Brynn?" Phoenix hissed. "The longer we wait, the less chance we have to save him."

"I know," she bit her lip. "But Heron's right. We can't possibly go up against a hundred monks on our own. We have to let the others in."

He scrubbed a hand restlessly over his face and head. He could feel the tension building again. He wanted to pull out his sword and run screaming through the halls, killing anyone who tried to stop him getting to Brynn. It took a huge battle of wills for him to subdue the bloodlust pounding in his body.

"OK," he grunted. He pointed along the corridor. It led roughly south. "We'll head for the door. You listen ahead of us and I'll keep an eye out behind. Keep going that way and we should come to the door soon enough. Can you tell when Marcus' hour has passed?"

She nodded once, eyes on the empty hall. Together, they slipped out of the bathroom and trod softly along the tiled passageway. Phoenix drew Blódbál forth, steeling himself.

The sword sang its tempting song in his head. He pushed it to the back of his mind and focussed on watching for enemies.

With incredible luck, they made it all the way to the front lobby without seeing a single person. In the distance, the chanting that had drawn them through the sewers was reaching some sort of peak. Massed male voices swelled and resounded, echoing in weird disharmonies through the dark stone hallways. Most of the monks must be attending whatever twisted ceremony was going on in the depths of the Temple. Phoenix only hoped it wasn't something to do with Brynn.

Soft-footed, they slipped into the vast, dark entranceway of the Temple. They came out beside the left foot of an enormous statue of Set. It towered overhead, glossily black and silent. Phoenix couldn't help but wonder if the god was, somehow, watching them. He hoped not.

Directly opposite was the main door. A single, bored-looking monk-soldier stood beside it with his back against the wall; eyes closed. Phoenix decided to take a chance. It was too good an opportunity to miss. If they took out the doorkeeper, he could steal the man's robe and hide in plain view.

A quick look at Jade told him she must be thinking along similar lines. She whispered a soft command and the guard's legs crumpled beneath him. He fell to the floor with a gentle sigh and began to snore.

Phoenix sent her a grin and a quick thumbs-up then ran across the open foyer to drag the monk into the shadows. Together they tied and gagged him with strips of his own underclothes then stuffed him behind a huge copper cauldron that stood to one side of the door. Jade stayed to make sure he didn't cause a ruckus if he awoke. Phoenix grabbed the curved sword, sheathed Blódbál and donned the robe. He pulled the cowl to hide his face then took up a post by the door and proceeded to wait with a thumping heart and sweaty palms.

So far so good.

Time had been flying past. Now it seemed to crawl at the speed of a half-dead snail. For the fiftieth time, Phoenix wished he had a watch. Jade had said she could tell when an hour had passed. Surely it must be soon. How long could they wait before Brynn was murdered?

The far-off, eerie chorus stopped abruptly. There was a brief, uneasy silence followed by a sharp scream of pure terror and pain. Phoenix closed his eyes and gripped the hilt of the Egyptian sword tightly. He felt sick. That couldn't have been Brynn. Please. There was no way he could even ask Jade if she could tell, because, at that moment, she slipped past without speaking to him, heading toward another large cauldron that stood behind the second door. He stared at her, wondering what on earth she was doing.

His attention was diverted by a new noise. This one came from outside the thick doors he supposedly guarded. It sounded remarkably like a large, angry crowd getting closer.

There was a frantic thumping on the door. Phoenix stepped up and slid back a convenient eye-slot. The priest-guard outside didn't bother with a code or hand sign. He wasn't even looking at the door. He was too busy panicking at the sight of the square filling up with thousands of shouting, torch-bearing, armed protesters.

Phoenix grinned. Good old Marcus.

"Send out reinforcements, quick! There's a mob out here," the priest-guard hissed.

"Right away," Phoenix replied smartly, sliding the spy-hole shut again. He waited as long as he could, giving Marcus a chance to get closer and Jade the chance to finish whatever she was doing.

Jade appeared at his side. "It's time?"

“Yep. Seems that way,” he said cheerfully. “Time to save the world again.” In the back of his mind, he noted a strange hissing noise coming from the left and right.

“Oh, please,” she rolled her eyes. “Just open the door and let the nice angry people in.”

“Your wish is my command, my lady.” Not wanting to be mistaken for a priest by the mob, he yanked off the monk’s robe, swept her a bow then reached for the weighty wooden bar that held the door fast.

Before they could open the great portal, both hallways below the great statue of Set spewed forth black-robed monk-soldiers. Jade and Phoenix spun to face their enemy, weapons drawn but hopelessly outnumbered.

“This is *not* good,” Phoenix tried to keep his voice steady.

Jade glanced to her right and, bizarrely, smiled. “I thought this might happen. It’s under control. We just need to hold them off for about ten seconds. Don’t get separated because things are going to get very, very hot.”

“What?” He didn’t have time for anything more. The first monks were on him.

He had barely parried one blow, blocked a second and twisted aside a third when Jade yelled at him. She grabbed him by the back of the shirt and dragged him to the floor with unexpected strength.

The strange hissing noise from beside the doors grew louder. He glanced up, expecting a sword thrust from all sides but the priests of Set seemed to be bouncing off an invisible bubble over his head. Beside him, Jade sat up, her eyes closed, ignoring the frustrated hordes of monks slashing at her shield but wincing at every strike. Phoenix looked from her to them, bewildered.

“Exactly how is this helping us to open the door?” He asked acerbically. A monk swung a vicious stroke at the shield. His curved sword rebounded at an angle, accidentally impaling the surprised priest standing next to him. The urge to poke tongues at their helpless attackers was almost irresistible.

“Heron installed two of his steam aeolipile machines here as automatic door-openers here,” Jade said in a strained voice. “He told me now to make the steam pressure build up to dangerous levels. They are going to blow any second.”

Phoenix gaped at her. “Seriously?”

“No,” she flashed him an annoyed look, “I’m just sitting here for the fun of it, waiting to die again. Get your head down so I can make the shield smaller. I can’t hold it much longer against the iron in their swords.”

The hissing noise grew louder still. Now there was also an ominous, metallic groaning and several monks began to cast worried looks that direction. Jade slipped an arm through Phoenix’s and drew him closer.

“I’ll have to strengthen the shield. Hang on.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

The groaning escalated to an earsplitting whine. There was an almighty tearing explosion as metal burst asunder and threw lethal shards in all directions. One of the main doors twisted and buckled as its hinges tore from the wall. Hot water and steam cascaded onto the floor and broke against their shield in a hissing wave. Scalding globs of copper and water showered down from above. Monks screamed and fell, burnt by water and pierced by shrapnel. Jade watched in sickened horror as men fell and died around them.

Hot copper speared into her shield. Some bounced off but the spell was weakening so some shards simply slowed and hung suspended in air. Her concentration faltered as her strength slipped away. The shield began to thin.

A second explosion rent the air, this time from behind the other door. Hinges broke away from the stone wall. The door teetered and fell outward, squashing three guards and making a rampway down the stairs to the feet of the astonished rioters outside.

More metal and super-heated water shot toward Jade and Phoenix where they crouched on the floor. Jade gasped as the impact shook her shield, body and mind. In sheer desperation, she sought for more strength from somewhere – anywhere. Suddenly, power seemed to flow in through her hands. Reflexively, she tightened her grip on Phoenix and drew, from him and his sword, the power she needed to sustain the spell. His energy tasted a hot red-gold. The shield became near-visible as a purple-blue shimmer in the air.

Finally, the explosions stopped and the steam dissipated toward the high ceiling. A moment of stunned silence followed - until the crowd outside realised they were not about to be set upon by hundreds of warrior-priests. Most of the monks had run or were dead in the foyer, fallen at the feet of their god in a puddle of cooling water.

With a mass yell of triumphant anger, a great tide of people brandishing swords and torches, swept up the stairs and into the foyer. They splashed through the water and split like a river at the feet of Set. Half went up one corridor and half the other, just like they had somehow planned it that way.

Relieved, Jade dropped the shield and staggered to her feet. Phoenix joined her, standing back in awe to watch the bloodthirsty mob pass. He held Blódbál. There was an worrying expression of fierce delight on his face.

Two figures detached themselves from the torrent of people and stopped next to them. She smiled wearily at Marcus and Heron. They weren't wearing priest robes, which was probably a good thing at the moment. The old man grinned back like a mischievous schoolboy.

Marcus simply nodded at the broken doors, "Dramatic but effective."

"And you," Phoenix indicated the rioters. "You must have the gift of the gab to get so many here so fast. Where're your robes?"

Marcus shrugged. "Their hatreds run deep. We decided it would be more effective to be Romans against Set, rather than priests against Romans. Less chance of being killed by our own mob. Shall we see about saving Brynn and destroying the obelisk?"

"Maybe you should wait here, Heron," Jade laid an anxious hand on the old man's thin arm. "You've done more than enough."

The inventor shook his head. "No, young lady, I don't think I have. Besides, I haven't had this much excitement in years. I've already thought of at least five new inventions: something for magnifying the voice; a quick-fire device for lighting torches faster..."

She put her hand over his mouth. "Later. Let's go help Brynn."

He nodded, his faded blue eyes turning serious.

Phoenix pointed down the corridor next to Set's left foot. "If this place is laid out like the one in Memphis, the prison cells should be down that way."

"What if he's already been taken to the sacrifice chamber?" Jade asked.

"We have to start somewhere," his expression turned grim. "I don't think we should split up; not when we're this close to finishing it."

She agreed and they raced after the last stragglers from Marcus' crowd. As they ran down the seemingly-endless stone corridors, Jade couldn't escape the feeling that this had all been a little too easy.

There were skirmishes going on everywhere. Deftly, the small group skirted those they could and ended those they couldn't. It looked very much like the rioters were winning. The floor was littered with bodies of the Priests of Set. Hopefully they would even *stay* dead. It took only a few minutes to reach the cells; and an even shorter time to discover that they were empty. Brynn was not there. Exchanging a despairing look with Phoenix, Jade spun on her heel and led her companions back to the foyer. They dodged into the second corridor, running as fast as they could over the body-strewn stone floor.

The corridor ended suddenly, opening out onto a balcony that ran the length of a vast, stone chamber below. Long stairs descended to the floor on the left and right. Carried to the stone railing by their momentum, the four piled up against it and stared down into a chaotic scene below.

Most of the remaining priests must have been here when the rioters broke in. A pitched battle was taking place at the base of both staircases as monks fought to protect their High Priest. Screams and the clashing of metal echoed around the enormous chamber. Swords flashed and the dark-clad monks fell beneath the crowd's fury. The smell of hot blood and vomit drifted up. Jade covered her mouth and closed her eyes, unable to watch the carnage.

She opened them when Phoenix nudged her with an elbow. At the far end of the dark, vaulted room burned an enormous furnace. The great hall suffocated in its heat. In front of it was a large, stone altar. The High Priest of Set stood at one end with his back to the furnace. Smoky torchlight glinted off his golden mask. Around him were eight blood-masked priests of the Inner Circle. They ignored the fighting. With bowed heads and linked hands, they circled the altar and chanted.

Jade gasped and grabbed at Phoenix's arm. There on the altar, wearing only a loincloth, lay Brynn. His eyes were closed, his pale skin blotched with bruises and dirt, his hands and feet bound. He looked tiny, young and helpless.

They watched in horror as the High Priest raised his hands over his head. A curved knife blade gleamed. Jade sought desperately for a spell strong enough to be useful at such a distance, against such magic. The High Priest looked up and, for an instant, Jade was sure she detected a satisfied smile behind that expressionless golden mask. Marcus snatched an arrow from the quiver across his back and laid it on his bowstring. Before he could loose it, the knife flashed down and plunged into Brynn's thin, white chest.

Jade screamed her throat raw. She fell to her knees as the Binding spell that linked her to Brynn broke and pain exploded in her heart and left hand. Beside her, Phoenix gasped and clutched at his own chest. Marcus staggered, grabbing at the railing as the pain struck him, too. His bow and unspent arrow clattered uselessly to the ground. Heron crouched beside them, anxious and bewildered.

It took just a few seconds for the red mist of pain to clear but it seemed like an eternity. When it was gone, Jade felt empty and lost. Brynn was dead. There was a gap in the Binding that had held them together. She could feel it in every cell of her body. The vine she had Bound them with snaked out of her hand and fell, lifeless, to the ground. Numbly, she gathered it up, stared at it then shoved it into her shirt. Brynn was dead. It

didn't seem possible. She struggled to her feet and looked down again at the circle of Priests around his lifeless little body. Most had left to join the melee. Only the High Priest remained.

Phoenix pulled himself up beside her, his face set like stone. His eyes blazed with the fire of revenge, fed by Blódbál's magic. Jade found she had no desire to stop him. Her heart cried out for vengeance, too. Silently, she drew Marcus and Heron a few steps backward as Phoenix moved down the stairs. He never took his eyes off the High Priest. He glided through the crowd below and the rioters seemed to know instinctively he was trouble. A path cleared as he stalked toward the altar.

Up on the balcony, Marcus drew his bow once more, aiming at the gold-masked priest.

Jade put out a hand to stop him. "It won't work. I can see a shield spell around him. Phoenix might be able to breach it with Blódbál but a normal arrow would just bounce off."

"But Brynn..." Marcus began to protest, his dark eyes troubled. "We can't just leave him there."

"We won't," Jade assured him. She felt strangely calm – as though she were watching all this on TV and not living it at all. Brynn's death didn't seem real. Her head was perfectly clear and she knew exactly what had to be done next. Grief would have to come later. "Let Phoenix deal with the priest for now. I don't think anyone will be able to come near him and live at the moment. Blódbál has him. I'll get Brynn's...body. Your job is to destroy the Tekhen of Set and release Anuket, remember? If we don't then Brynn's death was for nothing."

Marcus gazed at her for a moment then nodded. He slung his bow back over his shoulder. "Give me the Hammer."

Jade reached into her shirt for the Bag but Heron seized her arm. She turned impatiently. The old man pointed at the altar in wordless dismay. The High Priest gathered up Brynn's limp body and carried it toward the massive furnace that stood at the end of the hall. He was obviously intending to burn it. The Ceremony of Burning, Heron had called it.

"You must not let him burn the body," Heron cried. "We have to stop him!"

Jade glanced down at the crowd but Phoenix was still too far away and beset by at least five priests. Although he didn't look to be in any danger, there was still no way he would get there before the act was done.

It was vitally important that Brynn's body be kept intact. She had no way of bringing him back to life but something deep in her heart told her that this part of the Priests' ceremony *must* not be completed. If it was, Brynn's spirit would be forever condemned to an agonising afterlife. No matter what was true in her world, in *this* one, the afterlife was probably real.

How could she possibly stop it? None of her spells were strong enough to penetrate the Priests' shield. She couldn't fly and had no power over the stone and fire of the furnace. So what did?

Water.

She needed water to put the fire out. Where from? Where had she seen water recently? A niggling memory teased her as the Priest stepped ever closer to the glowing furnace door.

Then it came to her. With a cry, she turned and sprinted along the balcony. Marcus and Heron hurried after her. Luckily, there were no priests on this level so she ran full-tilt, without interruption, toward the far end of the room. Skidding to a halt, she saw what she'd been hoping to see. Almost directly beneath this end balcony was a short, wide chimney. The heat here was unbearable. Even the floor beneath their feet radiated an uncomfortable

warmth. Jade could only just make out the rest of the room through the heat-haze rising from the chimney.

As the others caught up, she snatched at her shirt. She yanked the Hyllion Bagia free and pulled open the wide black mouth. Leaning as far out as she could over the balustrade, she turned the Bag upside down and put the tips of her fingers inside its maw.

“Water!” she yelled, blinking against the searing heat and smoke. Nothing happened. Jade almost cried in despair as the High Priest took the last two steps to the furnace and reached for the door. What had she said to Heron? Something about the water being warm? Something that had let water enter the Bag.

“Seawater!” she screamed.

From the depths of the bag burst a torrent of water. It shot out, pouring into the chimney as though a dam had broken. There was a shocking, explosive hiss from inside the stone structure. Steam and ash began to gush from every opening. Jade closed her eyes and cast her own shield spell to stop herself from being scalded. She didn’t want to move while water still gushed from the Bag. If the fire died completely out, there was no way the ceremony could be completed.

There was an ominous cracking sound from below. She opened her eyes. The High Priest began backing away from the furnace, calling out furious instructions to his henchmen. She saw, with satisfaction, that he still held Brynn in his arms. The Priests’ shield spell should protect his small body from the inevitable science that was about to happen.

At last, the Bag seemed to be empty. Jade drew back, tucking it inside her shirt. She glanced at Heron and Marcus, who were staring at her in amazement. There was another loud *crack* from the furnace.

“Now would be a really good time to run away,” she advised.

The three reached the other end and were racing down the stairs when the furnace finally succumbed to the laws of physics and exploded. Cold seawater, sucked into the Bag during her swim in the harbour, combined with the superheated blocks, caused the stones to fracture into hundreds of lethal pieces. Jade threw up a shield to protect them as they ran. Shards of stone ricocheted away.

Any remaining monks were cut down by flying stone. Only the High Priest remained standing, untouched in his bubble of magic.

Phoenix, now within three paces of the High Priest, came through unscathed – unwittingly protected by the monk. He stepped closer as the High Priest turned to face him with Brynn’s body still hanging limply in his arms. Well, now was the time to test Blódbál’s magical strength. Would it penetrate a shield?

He drew his mouth into a wide, unpleasant grin and advanced another step. The High Priest moved back, seeming confused by this insane tactic. Obviously most people were so frightened of his powers and henchmen that he was rarely tested. Phoenix intended to change that. He raised Blódbál.

“You killed my friend,” he growled, fighting an internal battle against the sword even as he spoke. He had to think, not just give in to the desire for revenge. The sword wanted him to bathe in blood; to slaughter without thought. If he did, he would be just as bad as the priests of Set, Zhudai and all the other evil forces in this realm.

The priest glanced at the body in his arms and back up at Phoenix. Then he threw Brynn at his enemy. Taken by surprise, Phoenix barely had time to catch the boy before he hit the floor. He staggered under the weight, lowering the body awkwardly to the ground.

With an unintelligible shout, the High Priest pointed at several of his fallen soldier-monks. Phoenix groaned. He knew what came next. Sure enough, a flash of red-purple

shot from the High Priest's fingertips, split and earthed itself in the still bodies of five dead monks. They stirred. Like string puppets they slowly, jerkily stood up and drew their weapons. Milky-eyed and expressionless, they advanced on Phoenix.

"Dammit," He glanced down at Brynn's body. He couldn't let the High Priest near it and he couldn't let him get away, either. The five monks formed an undead wall between where he stood and where the High Priest watched with an irritating air of smugness.

His only advantage might be that undead monks were a fraction slower than live ones. Phoenix glanced quickly around. He didn't have much room to manoeuvre. The floor was littered with chunks of stone and dead bodies. He stood his ground, eyeing the priests as they jerked their way toward him. Behind them the High Priest folded his arms and waited.

The first monk raised his curved sword and slashed down at Phoenix's head. Ducking underneath, Phoenix thrust Blódbál deep into the priest's body. It kept walking, the curved Egyptian blade still descending unstopably. Phoenix dropped almost to his knees, turned and used his sword like a fishing pole, slinging the animated corpse, continuing its momentum with added strength. The undead priest slid off the end of his sword and flew in an ungraceful arc to land awkwardly on the stone-strewn floor. Red-purple light flashed and earthed itself into the corpse. It twitched then, inevitably, climbed to its feet again. Damn!

A slight sound made Phoenix turn. Another cowed figure struck an overhead cut at him. They weren't very imaginative undead swordsmen. Dodging to one side, Phoenix caught the blade on his own enough to deflect it and swung his sword up and over in an arc that ended only when the monk had been sliced in two from left collarbone to right hip. The legs kept walking for a couple more steps then the whole body collapsed to the ground, shuddered a few times then stilled. OK. That was more like it. Looked like a good beheading was all they needed.

Another took the place of that twice-killed priest and another beside him. Two more came up from the left and a fifth and sixth staggered in from the right, one with a large chunk of stone, rather gruesomely, still embedded in his chest. This was getting ridiculous.

Beheading wasn't exactly easy to get right and clearly there wasn't any point in re-killing the monks any other way, as the High Priest would just bring them and more back to life until Phoenix got tired or made a fatal mistake. No, the only way to finish this was to end it at the source. He turned his head briefly and gauged the distance to the High Priest. He would only get one chance at this. If he failed, he would fall beneath the swords of the undead. Even if he succeeded, he couldn't guarantee that the undead monks would be stopped. It was a big risk.

Seeing him hesitate, the High Priest laughed aloud and cast his spell again. Half a dozen more priests clambered to their feet and shuffled forward. With a dismissive gesture of his hand, the golden-masked priest turned and began to walk away, leaving his minions to deal with his enemy. It was now or never.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Phoenix changed his grip on Blódbál and hefted it to his shoulder. The undead swayed closer, blades glinting. Four steps away. Taking careful aim, he threw the blade like a spear, putting all his improbably high strength behind it. Three steps away. The sword sailed through the air, straight between the undead priests. Being dead, none of them had quick enough reactions to catch it or step in front of it this time. Two steps away; swords descended toward Phoenix's unprotected head. Blódbál flew unerringly toward its target. Its magic field sliced neatly through the Priests' shield without even a purple-blue flicker.

Perhaps sensing a disturbance in his shield, the High Priest of Set spun around – just in time for Blódbál to embed itself up to the hilt in his chest.

For a moment, the man stared blankly at Phoenix through the eyeslits of his golden mask. Then he looked down at his own body and saw the sword. He coughed once before his legs crumpled and he collapsed to the ground without a sound. The gold mask fell away from his face, revealing a very ordinary-looking, bald-headed older man. His dark eyes stared up at the ceiling. Blood dribbled out of his mouth.

Their power gone, the animated dead dropped to the ground in pathetic little heaps of black cloth, their weapons clattering on the stone floor.

Letting out a gusty sigh of relief, Phoenix walked up and nudged the body of the High Priest with his toe before withdrawing Blódbál and wiping the blade on the monk's black robe. He picked up the mask and turned it over. Just like the furniture in the vizier's stolen treasury, it was fake: gilded wood. Disgusted, he tossed it down.

Looking around, Phoenix discovered the room had emptied. The rioters must have decided two explosions in one riot were more than they had bargained for and run away. All that remained were the dead bodies of priests littering the floor, along with great lumps of stone. He had no idea why the furnace had blown but he was pretty sure Jade must have had something to do with it. Or maybe Heron.

Speaking of which.....

There was no sign of his companions in the room or up on the balcony. A moment's thought told him they had probably gone to try and destroy the tekhen of Set, as they were supposed to. He decided the obelisk would most likely be somewhere outside the west wall of this room.

A woman screamed. Jade's voice. It was not a yell of triumph but a shriek of fear and pain. Clutching his sword, Phoenix's first instinct was to rush to the rescue. His second was to sneak. He ignored Blódbál's urgings and went with his second. A few swift steps brought him to a shadowed exit in the west wall. Crouching down, he peered around the corner then drew quickly back. What he saw made him glad he'd ignored his sword.

The small garden courtyard outside was dominated by the towering obelisk of Set. It also swarmed with Roman soldiers. At the base of the obelisk, Marcus, Jade and Heron were all being held prisoner. Phoenix peeked again, confirming his worst fears.

Not far from his friends, looking faintly pleased with himself, stood their worst enemy: Zhudai. On a bench nearby reclined a fat Roman wearing a stained, purple-edged toga. He appeared discontented. A soldier approached him and bowed, addressing him as 'my lord Priscus'. Phoenix grimaced. What the heck was the Proconsul of Egypt doing here in the middle of the night?

He sighed and leaned against the wall with his head thrown back. Now he somehow had to rescue the others, as well as get that stupid obelisk knocked down. When would this end? Take one badguy down and two more popped up to replace him.

That gave him an idea. He hurried back to where the High Priest lay. With quick glances at the door, he stripped the priest of his robe and snatched up the discarded golden mask. Donning the robe, he tied the mask strings and pulled the cowl up to hide his hair. Hopefully they wouldn't notice the bloody slice in the cloth. Blódbál went up one long sleeve.

He began to pace toward the door, trying to look appropriately solemn and evil. Eight Roman soldiers appeared. They stopped, apparently aghast at the carnage. Noticing Phoenix, they hurried forward.

"My lord," the lead soldier said, "the Proconsul and his advisors await you outside. We have captured the intruders."

He bowed and hoped his wild heartbeat wasn't as loud as it sounded. He was about to deliberately walk into the hands of his enemies; alone.

In the courtyard, his courage almost failed him. There were even more soldiers now. Then sight of his friends standing helpless in the hands of the Romans renewed his determination. If he could get close enough to Jade, he might be able to make this work after all.

The soldier led him up to Priscus, who raised a weary eyebrow at him. Phoenix bowed deeply but said nothing, hoping that the High Priest was normally as silent as they'd seen him. Priscus didn't seem bothered. He waved a fat hand at the prisoners.

"We caught your intruders for you, Anhotep. I am so sorry we couldn't get here earlier, though. The streets were awash with dirty rioters. They seemed to be quite annoyed with you. I'm sorry we couldn't save more of your followers. You have lost quite a few, haven't you?"

Phoenix inclined his head without speaking. His lack of reaction seemed to irritate Priscus.

"I understand you didn't even get to finish your little ceremony?" the Proconsul continued, inspecting his nails. "Well, you're welcome to take another prisoner to replace the boy. It's the least we can do. Go ahead and pick one. The others we'll execute or send as slaves to the Games in Rome."

Phoenix bowed again, struggling against the overwhelming urge to stick Blódbál between the fat Roman's ribs right now. That would be a very short term gain, indeed. He was here to free his friends and destroy the obelisk. Priscus wasn't important.

Priscus pursed his small mouth and looked at him through half-lidded eyes. He heaved himself to his feet and turned a plump shoulder.

"This is boring. I've been dragged here in the middle of the night for no very good reason I can see. Zhudai, just execute these troublemakers or send them to Rome for the Emperor's Games and get it over with. I'm going home." He waddled away toward the exit, followed by three fawning servants.

Slightly taken aback, Phoenix decided that constituted a dismissal and followed the soldier over to where Zhudai conferred in quiet tones with one of the Roman generals. They seemed to be arguing. Interesting.

As he approached, they broke off and turned to face him. He bowed again, slightly shallower this time. He didn't miss the flare of anger in Zhudai's narrow eyes, nor the fleeting expression of disgust in the Roman general's. So, there was a lack of unity in the camp, was there? The Roman and Zhudai obviously didn't like the High Priest and there was a good chance the feeling was mutual – which meant Phoenix didn't have to wait for orders or instructions.

With an effort, he turned his back on his enemies and walked toward his friends. Jade raised her chin and glared defiantly back at him. Marcus' gaze was as unwavering as usual. Heron just shrugged.

“Take me then. I’m old. Let the young ones live.”

Phoenix stepped up to Jade and waved the soldiers back a little. They glanced at Zhudai before moving.

“It’s me,” he whispered. To her credit, she managed to keep her reaction down to a slight widening of the eyes and a quick flicker of a glance at Zhudai.

“Give me the Bag,” he instructed. He moved so he now blocked Zhudai’s view of her. Quickly, she slid the bag from under her shirt, into his waiting hand.

“Be ready to shield.”

She nodded slightly and cast her eyes down as though frightened. He stepped up to Marcus and looked him up and down. The Roman stared stoically past him. As Phoenix moved past, he murmured, “Protect Jade.” Marcus didn’t even twitch.

Phoenix nodded to Heron and waved a soldier over. “Bring the old one inside,” he said softly, hoping the soldier had never heard the High Priest’s voice. Luck was with him. The soldier grabbed Heron, hauling the inventor back into the main hall. That was one out of the way.

He turned and began to pace back toward the hall. He was almost there when a voice called out to him.

“Anhotep, wait!” It was Zhudai. Phoenix looked back over his shoulder without turning. The Chinese sorcerer watched him with narrowed eyes. Phoenix knew that expression and it didn’t bode well for his disguise. It was the same look Jade got when she was checking something out for magical auras. Apart from Blódbál and the Bag, Phoenix was about as magical as a bowl of icecream. Possibly less.

Time for Plan B.

As calmly as he could, he reached into the Bag and muttered, “Iron gloves.” Footsteps drew closer behind him. Zhudai was coming to investigate. He only had time to draw on the left one. Hopefully that would be enough to give him the strength to heft Mjölfnir.

Phoenix spoke again to the Bag. “Mjölfnir.” The handle of the Hammer of Thor slapped into his iron-clad palm. He pulled it out, tucked the bag away and slid the Hammer up the other sleeve. He now had magical weapons in both hands. It was now or never.

A hand grabbed his shoulder, spinning him around. Zhudai stood before him.

“You are not Anhotep!” the sorcerer accused. “Who are you?” He reached out and shoved back the hood, eyes widening as he saw hair where there should be none. With claw-like fingernails, he cut the string that held the golden mask and ripped it from Phoenix’s face.

“Probably the last person you wanted to see right now,” Phoenix grinned at him and drew both weapons from his sleeves. Before anyone could react, he pulled back his arms, stabbed at Zhudai with Blódbál and clumsily threw Mjölfnir at the tekhen of Set at the same time. The sorcerer made a desperate grab at the weapon as it sailed past but the sheer weight and momentum of it knocked his hand aside. Unfortunately, his movement also took him out of range of Blódbál’s thrust.

There was a hoarse scream as Mjölfnir connected with the obelisk. Phoenix thought it came from Zhudai but he wasn’t sure, because this time they had the right tekhen. This time there was a serious light show.

The hammer smashed into the column, sending stone fragments shooting across the courtyard. Then it rebounded, arced around like a boomerang and struck it again from a different direction. More stone flew. Cracks appeared like jigsaw pieces up and down the length of the column. A thousand beams of green-white light shone from the breaks, illuminating the obelisk like a Christmas tree.

Phoenix held up a hand to shield his eyes and felt the Hammer of Thor smack into his palm. He only just missed hitting himself in the forehead. Stuffing Mjölfnir and the glove back into the Bag, he turned his attention to the enemy. Anuket should be able to break free on her own now.

His caution was unnecessary. Most of the Roman soldiers had either bolted or were standing, watching the lights, apparently transfixed. Zhudai had vanished. Jade and Marcus appeared by Phoenix's side. They had snatched their weapons back from fleeing Roman guards. Together, they stared at the tekhen. The cracks got wider.

"I know I've said this before," Jade said softly, "but now would be a good time to run away." So they did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

They made it inside the door and flattened themselves against the wall just as all hell broke loose. The Tekhen of Set blew outward and upward, carried on beams of light in all directions. It sounded like an enormous waterfall roaring into the depths of a valley. Scents of springtime washed into the hall: grass, water and flowers. There was the faint echo of a woman's exultant cry of freedom and a man's cry of anger.

Then, light and sound vanished, leaving everything in total darkness. Outside, great lumps of rock came crashing to earth like solid rain. Screams of fear were cut off with sickening abruptness. Finally, silence reigned.

Jade whispered a few small witchlights to life and sent them out. The four companions peered around the doorway. The courtyard was strewn with pieces of rock. Any people left were buried under tonnes of granite. The Tekhen of Set had disintegrated and the first hints of dawn washed the sky faintly pink over the eastern horizon.

A woman appeared. She stepped gracefully amongst the destruction, placing her bare feet with care. She wore a long, red-brown tunic dress and a headdress of tall feathers crowning thick, dark hair. Her tanned face was exquisitely beautiful with green eyes, full lips and a straight nose. If it weren't for the fact that she glowed faintly, she could have simply been a very lovely woman.

Phoenix blinked. Jade elbowed him then poked Marcus, who appeared similarly stunned. They left the Temple, approached the woman and bowed.

"Anuket," Jade spoke for them all. "We are honoured to meet you."

The goddess smiled. Her voice was musical and many-layered, as though three or more people were speaking at once. "You have done me a great service this day, Arawn's daughter. My fellow gods of the Nile thank you also: Hapi, Khnum, Setis." She raised a hand and three more beings appeared beside her: two male and one female – all equally beautiful. They kissed her cheeks, nodded to the humans then vanished.

Anuket smiled again on her rescuers. "What reward can I give you for freeing me from Set's power?"

"Er..." Jade glanced at Phoenix, who shrugged. "We thought you were just supposed to give us a task for our next quest in India."

"Yes, of course," the goddess inclined her head. She held out a hand and large disc apparently made of silver appeared in it. She handed it to Jade who took it gingerly, avoiding the sharpened edge. One face was engraved with intricate, beautiful, geometric designs. Anuket spoke again.

"This chakra needs to be placed in the hand of its rightful owner, six nights hence, on the last night of the dying moon. If you succeed, a path will be taken that will make whole what is torn asunder, he who has wronged will be redeemed and an Empire will unite. The weapon's name is *Sudarshana*."

"Cryptic, as usual," Phoenix muttered in Jade's ear, handing over the Hyllion Bagia. She shushed him, trying to remember the instructions. She dropped the silver disc into the Bag, whispering its name as she did.

Anuket turned her fathomless green gaze on Phoenix and smiled as though she had heard his comment. "Have you chosen your reward? Gold; power; a life?"

He shrugged then his expression froze.

"Did you say 'a life'? Can you restore a life?"

Anuket nodded. He spun on his heel and ran into the dark temple. Bewildered, the others watched the empty doorway in silence. Moments later, he emerged, bearing the small body of Brynn in his arms. Jade had to look away. She wasn't yet ready to admit

Brynn was really gone. Phoenix laid Brynn down on a flat piece of the broken obelisk and smoothed back his unruly hair. He looked pale, peaceful and absurdly young.

“Can you give me back *his* life?” His voice was rough, angry, as if he was afraid the answer would be ‘no’.

Anuket sent him a puzzled glance. “You would have me restore the life of this child when you have lost too many of your own? You would risk everything you are trying to achieve in this realm to save one small, insignificant soul? Why?”

“He is *not* insignificant. Time and time again, Brynn has proved himself the truest companion. We’re family. We need him. *I* need him.” Phoenix ground to a halt, obviously struggling to speak through a tight throat.

“Very well,” Anuket acceded. “All of you; kneel by his side and place your hands over his heart and head. Jade, the vine. I will restore your Binding, as well.”

They did as ordered, feeling fragments of stone dig into their knees. Anuket closed her eyes and raised her hands to the heavens, murmuring and whispering in a singsong voice that reminded Jade of Elven music and the Druid Spring Equinox ritual. A gentle green glow formed in the palms of her hands, getting stronger by the minute. It began to spill over, flowing onto their heads in a waterfall of light. Jade’s hair almost stood on end as the powerful magic washed over her. She could taste springtime and growing things; hear birdsong and smell grass. Her body felt renewed and strong. It was like the Druid ritual – a life-spell of unimaginable power.

The singing stopped. Anuket clapped her hands four times and a shower of purple-blue sparks cascaded over them. The goddess touched each of them on the forehead with a fingertip then stepped back.

“It is done.”

Beneath her hand, Jade felt a flutter. She sensed, too, the deep, inner renewal of the Binding Spell she had placed on her friends. The vine was gone. Their circle was once again complete. Brynn’s thin chest rose once; twice. He coughed and groaned and his eyes flickered open. For a moment, he stared blankly up at them then grimaced.

“Ouch. If this is what it feels like to die and come back to life, I don’t envy you two any more at all!”

Jade and Phoenix laughed and crowded around the boy, thumping him on the back and hugging him until he pushed them all away with a protest.

“OK, OK, I get the message. You’re glad to see me.” He stared around at their surroundings. “Now will someone please explain to me what’s going on? The last thing I remember was the High Priest sticking a knife into me.”

He touched the still-tacky blood on his chest with a shudder and looked at Phoenix. “Hey, I’m really sorry I killed you. Did I say that before? Well now I really, really mean it.”

Phoenix squeezed the boy’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I overreacted. You did the right thing and I’m...well, I’m glad you’re back.”

Brynn grinned. “Does this mean I get a bigger share of the treasure because you’re feeling guilty?”

Phoenix shoved at him. “You can have the whole lot for all I care, kid. Just don’t die on us again, ok?”

“I’ll try not to,” the boy assured him, rubbing his chest. He looked up and noticed Anuket smiling down at him. “Oh, hi. So you’d be Anuket? You brought me back?”

The goddess nodded.

“Thanks. A lot. A big, huge lot,” he said with awkward grace. “But can I ask a question? Why is that thing still standing?” He pointed at the temple, looming behind them.

“Good point,” Phoenix said, eyeing the structure with noticeable distaste. “I think we’d be doing the city a favour if we smashed it with the Hammer. Marcus!”

Glancing around, Jade realised that Marcus was nowhere to be seen. “Where’d he go?”

“I’m here,” the Roman’s deep voice carried from behind a large piece of stone not far away. He stepped backward into the light, his sword raised and ready to thrust. A second person emerged from the shadow, a mere inch from the end of Marcus’ blade. Their nemesis: Feng Zhudai.

The sorcerer stepped out proudly into the grey dawn light, ignoring the sharp edge at his throat. He drew the dark silk of his severe robes about him and sneered down at their astonished faces.

Jade gasped and gripped her staff. Phoenix stood and drew his sword in one smooth move. Even Brynn snatched up a handy rock and held it ready to throw, looking like a barbaric, blood-streaked cave-boy in his loincloth.

Anuket glided to Marcus’ side, her eyes full of frowning wonder. “I know this one,” she said softly. “*You* are the one who convinced Set to imprison me; whispering sly evils in the ear of a god already insane with the desire for power. That is your way, isn’t it? You manipulate others to grant you power that you do not have yourself.”

Zhudai said nothing. He raised his chin and stared at them scornfully through lowered eyelids. Furious, Jade stepped forward, her staff ready. United, Phoenix, Marcus and Brynn stood with her, facing their archenemy at last.

Marcus spoke, his normally-calm voice harsh with hatred. “My Lady Anuket. I claim his life as my reward.”

Zhudai tucked his hands inside the long sleeves of his black silk robe and looked at him disdainfully. “Stupid child,” he said, his voice heavily accented. He stretched out one hand, long nails curling like claws. “I still hold your father’s life and mind in my hand. If I die now, so does he. Is that what you want?”

“Agricola is no longer my father. He has been twisted by *your* corruption,” Marcus spat.

Zhudai laughed. “Agricola needed little convincing, boy. He wanted power as much as I. You were simply in our way. He would probably even be grateful if I eliminated his puling brat of a child.” He made a curious twisting gesture of his fingers and muttered a single word.

Jade realised what he was doing and desperately cast a shield spell between the sorcerer and Marcus – but nothing happened. Neither Zhudai’s spell nor her shield spell worked, leaving them both stunned.

Anuket waved her back. “He can do nothing in my presence and nor can you. He is out of his realm; far from his source of power. Here, my power is vastly stronger than his. That is why he had Set imprison me while he worked his will on Priscus. The question is: what do we do with him?”

“Again, my lady, I claim his life as mine,” Marcus growled, raising his sword.

Anuket shook her head sadly. “I cannot take a life, only give it.”

“Then let *me* take it,” Marcus shot back.

“I’m sorry. I cannot allow it,” she sounded regretful.

Jade stepped in, trying to deflect his anger from Anuket.

“Then can we at least banish him from ever coming to Albion, Sweden, Egypt or India? Make him stay in his own land for now. Stop him from sowing the seeds of chaos around the world.”

The goddess inclined her head. “That would be a fitting punishment, I believe; and well within my power to grant, if only for a short time. It is only just that I imprison him within his own lands in return for his actions against me.”

Zhudai made a hasty, angry motion with his hand, as though trying to cast another spell. Nothing happened. He glared at the goddess. "You will regret this; all of you. When I am imm....." He stopped himself in mid sentence, seeming to think he'd almost said too much. Snapping his mouth shut he wiped all expression off his face and once more tucked his hands away, ignoring them all.

Anuket sent him a long, measuring look then nodded to the companions. "Stand aside."

They did, shielding their faces as Anuket and Zhudai disappeared inside a brilliant ball of greenish light. It lasted only a second before it faded and was replaced by the pale wash of dawn.

Zhudai was gone. Anuket now sat on a rock, her glow dimmed, her face older.

Jade rushed forward. "Are you alright? What happened?"

Anuket laid a soft hand on her head and gave a tired smile. "I am fine, child. The sorcerer fought me with everything he had and I am weakened from my long confinement. Once the Nile has risen, I will be restored."

"And what about Zhudai," Phoenix interrupted.

"He is now restricted to his own lands. His power outside them was always limited. For now his magic is fed by his followers and they are mostly in his homeland. If you fail in your Quests, though, his power will spread throughout both worlds. For now, he cannot interfere directly. He cannot use the portals, either," Anuket confirmed. "But be aware that, should he take your amulets, he will be free to move about in both worlds. Even without them, he has much influence and has already set the kingdoms of India on the path to war. There will be many obstacles in your way and, if you reach his own lands, there he will be almost invincible."

"So what's new about that?" Brynn said in a quiet aside to Jade.

"Now," the goddess pushed herself up. "I believe there is one last task for you to perform."

When they all looked blankly at her, she laughed. "I think Thor would like his hammer back, don't you?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Phoenix groaned. He had forgotten.

Beside him, Jade tugged on his arm. “We need to make some sort of sacrifice to him and summon him here.”

She fished out the Bag and withdrew a small bunch of grapes leftover from their sketchy midnight snack under the dock. Next she offered the Bag to Marcus, who drew the gloves, belt and hammer from it. Jade laid the grapes on a piece of rock and nodded to him.

Looking quite silly, she called out. “Mighty Thor, accept this sacrifice and come to reclaim what is yours.”

Marcus swung the hammer gently down onto the fruit. It squashed, spurring grape-juice onto his tunic. He laid the hammer and accessories on the makeshift altar next to the sacrifice and they all waited.

Behind them, a shimmering Portal opened in the stone doorway to the Temple of Set. Through it came Thor, driving his goat-drawn chariot. The goats’ small hooves clattered on the stone floor. Stepping down, Thor swaggered over to the group, taking in the scene of chaos and carnage with the swift, approving glance of a professional soldier. His gaze fell on the squashed grapes. A look of disbelief came over his bearded face. He picked up the stem in one huge forefinger and thumb.

“What, you leave a path of destruction across Egypt, kill a templeful of priests to release Anuket but you can’t find something better to sacrifice for me than a pitiful handful of *fruit*? Honestly,” he shook his shaggy red head. “What are you mortals coming to these days? Sacrifices just aren’t what they used to be.”

Phoenix exchanged rueful glances with Jade and looked over the god’s shoulder at the shining liquid surface glistened in the open doorway. They had walked through that entrance at least four times tonight and neither of them had noticed its distinctive formation of three large slabs of stone. Jade sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Phoenix scrubbed a hand through his long hair and looked up at the brightening sky. It had been a long night.

Thor took up his hammer with evident glee, wiped the grapejuice off, and began exchanging pleasantries with Anuket.

Phoenix stared at the golden eastern horizon. His hand crept to Blódbál’s hilt and he drew the sword out. It sang softly to him, like a lover, filling his mind with images of death and glory. He reached a decision and strode toward the Norse god. Dropping down onto one knee, he proffered the sword with both hands.

“My lord, Thor, I’m returning Blódbál to you. I.. I can’t control it. I don’t like who I become when I use it – or, rather, when it uses me.” He said it quickly before he could change his mind. He could feel the shocked stares of the others on his back but this was something he had to do. With Blódbál in his hands he was a liability, not an asset.

Thor was silent a moment then burst into hearty laughter. Phoenix looked up at him, stunned. The god shook his red head and chuckled some more at the expression on Phoenix’s face. He wagged a thick finger at the kneeling boy.

“Y’know, it took Hrothgar at least three weeks to say exactly the same thing to me when I first gave him that sword. Well done, lad.”

“What?” Phoenix stood up, feeling silly and confused.

Thor thumped him gently on the shoulder, making his knees buckle. “I’ll say to you what I said to Hrothgar. Blódbál only has power over the weakminded. The very fact that you *can* give it back means you don’t have to – you do have the ability to control it.”

He must have read the doubt and relief in Phoenix’s face and held up a hand. “Don’t get me wrong, boy. It’s still very dangerous. You’ll need to be self-disciplined and learn to calm your mind to keep control of the bloodlust. Just ignoring what you feel won’t work. You’ll have to let go of any anger you’re carrying around in here,” he poked Phoenix in the region of his heart, leaving a bruise. “It can still take over if you give it a chance or if you want it to; but you’ve just proven that *you* are in control. You can choose how you react.”

Phoenix glanced over at Jade. She had said something very similar in Memphis and he hadn’t believed her. He looked down at the gleaming sword in his hands, feeling the connection, the power of it. Suddenly he was very glad he didn’t have to give it back. With a grin and a nod at Thor, he resheathed the weapon.

“Now,” Thor said, turning to Anuket and rubbing his hands together in anticipation, “I believe you have a river to flood and I’m just the god to help you with it. Did someone order storms?” With a toothy grin, he swung Mjölñir in an arc, admiring the purple-blue streak it left in the night air. A distant rumble of thunder answered.

Anuket smiled and laid a slender hand on Thor’s broad forearm. “You honour me, my lord.”

“Your chariot awaits,” Thor swept a hand toward it.

As they boarded the chariot, the Thunder-god gathered up the reins and glanced back over his shoulder at his audience.

“Oh, Thrudr says ‘hi’. Or, I should say, Truda.” He grimaced. “My daughter now insists on being called what you lot nicknamed her. By the way,” he nodded at the looming Temple of Set, “you might want to get outside the walls now. I think I need some practice throwing my lightning bolts. Hope old Set won’t be too upset if I accidentally demolish his temple. Don’t worry; I’ll leave the portal standing...accidentally, of course. What do you think, m’dear?” He smiled down at Anuket, who smiled up at him.

“I’m sure he couldn’t be upset by an accident, my lord.”

Thor roared his thunderous laugh again and flicked the reins across the backs of the two goats that drew his chariot. They leapt, pulling the vehicle smoothly up into the night sky.

Watching them in amazement, Phoenix muttered, “What was it you said before about now being a good time to run away?”

“Absolutely.” Jade agreed. As one, the group turned and ran.

From across the open square in front of the Temple, they watched. Far from needing practice, Thor was very precise in his aim. A single lightning bolt shot from the sky, split the highest tower of the Temple and shattered the main building into so much building rubble. Now, what was left burned sullenly as the red sun rose and bathed it in a bloody glow. A huge crowd of cheering observers began an impromptu dance in the square.

Heron spoke quietly in the warm dawn:

“And from the flames and ash of destruction shall emerge a stronger Phoenix. From his sacrifice shall come renewal and new life. He shall release the gift of the Nile once more upon the stricken lands of Egypt and Balance shall be restored.”

“What?” Jade blinked at the old man.

He smiled. “I was quoting from the old Egyptian texts about the Bennu bird – the Phoenix. I thought it sounded appropriate under the circumstances.”

The four companions were silent a few moments, digesting the words. Phoenix nodded slightly, pulling the corners of his mouth down and raising his eyebrows. “Well,

whaddya know – I did do that, didn't I? Or rather, we did." He threw a companionable arm around Marcus' and Jade's shoulders.

"Hey, speaking of lives," he grinned, "did you check your dagger, Jade? Did Anuket give you back a life?"

Jade snatched it out and examined it by the radiance of sunrise. Phoenix saw there were now six intact, blood-red rubies in the hilt. Anuket had, indeed, restored one of her lost lives. As she turned an astonished expression toward him, Phoenix held up his own knife to show her.

"Two!" He crowed. "She gave me *two* lives back. I have five lives again. Bring it on! Whoohooo!" Grabbing her hands he did a small dance with her, much to everyone's amusement. Even Marcus chuckled.

When he settled down, Heron gripped both him and Jade by the arm and sighed. "I suppose you'll be off now, will you?"

Phoenix shrugged, feeling uncomfortable with the old man's emotion.

"I'm afraid so," Jade leaned her head on Heron's shoulder. "As much as we'd love to stay awhile, we have to continue our quests so we can get home again."

"I thought as much." He released them and waved a hand at someone standing in the crowd. A man came over and Heron whispered in his ear. He nodded and vanished into the dawn shadows. "I sent a message home when Marcus and I were out raising a riot and asked my servants to pack up your belongings and bring them all there – just in case."

Phoenix exchanged surprised looks with Jade. How had the old dude known?

She spoke for them both. "You were really certain Phoenix was *the* Phoenix, weren't you? You really believed he'd do it."

Heron nodded. "I did and he did. You four make a formidable team. If you stay together, you're certain to succeed in your quests."

She gave the old inventor a hug. "I'm going to miss you."

"And I, you, my dear." He shook hands with the others, smiling broadly. "But I have enough new ideas to keep me busy for awhile, so off you go. That fire has died down enough now. You should be able to get to your doorway."

The servant returned, leading their horses. They all took their leave of Heron and made their way back into the destroyed courtyard of the Temple of Set. Just as Thor had predicted, the only thing left standing was the outer wall and the Portal. Behind it, the ruins still smouldered, giving off an uncomfortable heat.

Standing before the Portal, Phoenix looked at their little team. They had come a long way together but there was still a long road to travel. Squaring his shoulders, he looked across at Jade. She nodded. He stepped up, placed a hand on the portal and said "India". In a flash of light, the shimmering surface appeared between the stones. He heaved a quiet sigh of relief. He had been a little worried about Thor's aim.

Brynn yawned and stretched. He'd picked up an oversized monk's robe and, in spite of looking ridiculous, insisted on wearing it. Shoving the sleeves up his thin arms, he rubbed his eyes.

"Couldn't we have stayed just one night for a good sleep? This dying stuff really takes it out of you. Plus I've lost all my weapons and my lockpicks. I feel naked." He patted his body and look plaintively up at Jade.

"I promise we'll find some new toys and somewhere to sleep as soon as we get through," she assured him. She pulled her cloak out of her bags and donned it, flipping up the hood.

"No prison cells, though, ok?" the boy said crossly.

Phoenix laughed. “Brynn, I can’t guarantee anything where we’re going but you can be fairly sure that we *will* be shoved into at least one more dark prison cell. Possibly even two.”

Still laughing, the four trooped through the Portal, leaving Heron to shake his head in wonder at the sight.

In his cell, Long Baiyu laughed also. He had sensed Brynn’s passing with regret; his restoration with joy; and Phoenix’s triumph over Blódbál with relief. On Zhudai’s banishment, Baiyu laughed until the stones echoed with his exultation.

Now he sobered. Although Zhudai could not, himself, prey on the companions in India, he had many subordinates who would gladly do the job for him. How could the youngsters possibly cope against such odds? They were not yet ready to face everything Zhudai could throw at them. Thus far, it was only luck and circumstance that had prevented him from unleashing his full force upon them. For the moment, his magical skills were limited outside of his native land, so he worked through others to gain what he wanted - power. So far, his desire to control Agricola, Loki, Priscus and the Priests of Set had outweighed his desire to kill the four companions. If Zhudai began to take them seriously before they were truly ready, they would not stand a chance of winning through.

The next quest would be far from easy. Would their new-found sense of camaraderie and closeness survive the trials before them?

A Taste of things to come.....

80AD The Sudarshana

Jade Lockyer stepped into a grey-lit world of thunderous noise. It wasn't just noise. It was a shocking, almost solid booming that deafened her and pounded the breath from her body. Her mare took instant exception and reared up with a whinny that was lost in the din. Only luck made Jade clench her hand in time to keep hold of the reins. The horse backed up and danced to one side, tossing her head. Her hooves slipped on the glistening black rock underfoot and she almost fell. Pulling the mare's head down, Jade laid a hand on the long nose and gripped tightly. She yelled a *command* word into the animal's ear and watched for a second to make sure she settled.

Glancing around, she took stock of her surroundings. Ahead, pale light filtered through a vast wall of water plunging past a huge opening. She seemed to be in a large, stone cavern, behind a waterfall. Her hair lifted as the white torrent pushed a damp breeze into the cave. Droplets of moisture clung to everything, making the floor slippery and the walls drip. Every breath she drew of the laden air smelled of moss and fresh water.

As soon as it was clear there was no real danger, Jade turned to help the others coming through the Portal behind her.

First came Phoenix, looking every inch the warrior with wild black hair, a dirty-white shirt and iron-studded leather arm and leg guards. In one hand he held his mount's reins, in the other he clutched Blódbál, the enchanted sword given to him by Thor. Five of the seven blood-rubies embedded in the handle of his Life-dagger, sparkled at his hip as he stepped past Jade. Smears of dried blood darkened his clothes and skin. He looked exhausted but determined - a far cry from the cocksure fourteen year old boy who had awoken just two weeks ago to find himself trapped in an unfamiliar body in an unreal world.

After him came Brynn, yanking on the reins of his frightened pony. The young Breton boy had never ridden before their time in Svealand and the pony knew exactly who was boss. Looking a bit like an undersized Jedi in his stolen monk's robe, Brynn flinched at the onslaught of sound, shook his tousled auburn head and blinked in surprise. Recovering, he sent Jade a rueful, gap-toothed grin, pointed at his stubborn beast and shrugged.

The pony dug its front feet into the rock as it strained backward, brown eyes wild with fear. Only halfway through the glimmering portal, its rump would still be sticking out, into the Alexandrian dawn in faraway Egypt. Jade hurried forward. She *commanded* both his pony and Phoenix's grey stallion so they could be led aside to let Marcus through.

The handsome Roman boy emerged. If the roar affected him, the only sign he showed was a slight clenching of his jaw. His dark hair was trimmed much shorter than Phoenix's shoulder-length mop and his bare, soot-smudged arms were more tanned. His once-white Roman tunic was somewhat the worse for wear after their long night fighting in the Temple of Set. Dried blood crusted a shallow cut across his chest. Although obviously weary, he walked lightly and carried himself with his usual quiet dignity. He had fisted two sets of reins in one hand and held his long-bladed Svear sword in the other. A bow and quiver of arrows were slung across one shoulder and a short dagger sheathed at one hip.

Before long, all five horses were standing quite calmly, as though they couldn't even hear the tumultuous booming that shook the chamber.

In the few minutes it took for their eyes to adjust to the light, Jade noticed that her friends all looked as tired as she felt. Maybe they should have stayed one more night in

Alexandria. No, she dismissed the thought with regret; they had only 5 days to finish this Quest. They couldn't afford to waste any time.

She and Phoenix had already been trapped as Players in this 2000 year old game-world for two weeks too long. There was no telling how much time had passed in the real world. Any day now, the real-world game would be opened to the public domain on the internet and they might be swamped with other Players. She wondered if there would be any way of telling when the game was opened to the rest of the world. Would there be some sort of sign in the heavens? Some sort of awareness that they weren't alone any more in a demo version? Or was this world real, as they'd been told back on level One in Albion? Jade glanced around the damp cave. It certainly felt real enough. In fact, she realised, she'd long since stopped even doubting it.

She sighed. At the beginning of this adventure she'd been quite hopeful that they'd be home in a few days. It had now been two weeks and things were tougher each Level. It never seemed this hard in the books she read. They still had to finish Level Four and Five in order to get home, and they were all exhausted.

Jade pressed her lips together and adjusted the hood of her cloak. Out of habit, she touched the half-amulet that hung about her neck. It was safe. The two halves had drawn her and Phoenix into this realm and she was fairly sure they'd need them to get home again – assuming they ever managed to get to Level Five and defeat Zhudai. If they didn't, she and Phoenix could face a lifetime, trapped in this other-world of ancient violence.

She shuddered and screwed up her nose in an effort to prevent the sting of tears. She'd started this game as an escape from her ordinary life; a way of diving into the type of adventure realm she'd read about for years; a way of being something she was not. *Actually* being transported into the computer game had so not been part of her plan. Now she was stuck in a fantasy-world-real-world version of 80AD, somewhere deep in India, with a Quest to complete that she had no idea how to even begin.

Maybe she was just tired. She'd used a lot of energy up during the battle to save Brynn and release the Goddess Anuket in Egypt. With little sleep over the last forty-eight hours and days spent away from the forests her Elven heritage craved, she was exhausted. Unfortunately, knowing why she felt miserable didn't mean she could help feeling that way.

Ignoring Marcus' disapproving gaze, she quickly pulled out her herb bag. St John's Wort for depression and some barley grass for energy. That should do the trick. Marcus might think she could handle anything without the help of her herbs but she knew better. Her half-Elven avatar *needed* the herbs to supplement her magic. Without them, she just wasn't good enough to cope with this world.

She put the bag away and readjusted the weight of her backpack. Inside was the Hyllion Bagia – the bottomless bag that now held *Sudarshana*, a silver, disc-shaped chakra weapon. Anuket had told them to return it to its rightful owner on the last night of the dying moon, so that's what they had to do.

Regrettably, Anuket had been big on cryptic predictions but a bit short on details – like *who* the rightful owner was; what broken thing would it fix; what person who had done wrong would be redeemed; and whose Empire it would unite? There was no way of knowing. All Jade knew, from previous game instructions, was that the Quest had to be completed in the city of Punya-Vishaya, in India. Even that didn't help much. Wandering about a foreign city asking for the owner of a slab of pure silver was about as smart as wearing a sign on your forehead saying "please mug me".

No, they would have to find a more subtle way of tracing who it belonged to. Actually, first they'd have to find the city of Punya. OK, no: *first* they had to find a way out of this cave – if a way out even existed

Hope you enjoyed Book Three. Book Four is up at Smashwords as well. You can find out more about the 80AD series by Aiki Flinthart at: <http://aikiflinthart.weebly.com/>

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