

JEWEL

of the



Gods

Gloria Oliver

HIS MOOD SOURING, RED SURVEYED THE NEW ROOM

Like the one he'd woken up in, it was mostly bare. A small hole an arm's length up the left wall spewed a trickle of water, which collected in a deep rectangular basin carved into the floor then drained out through a slightly smaller hole at the bottom. A bowl beside the basin held a comb, a bar smelling of flowers, and a square piece of cloth.

Ignoring the bowl and its contents, he pulled off the blanket and squatted next to the water. He dipped his small hands into the cool liquid, just wanting to get this over with, and liberally flicked some of it onto his new body.

"It would seem you do not quite understand the concept of bathing."

Red glanced back over his shoulder, wondering at her semi-amused tone.

"What are you implying?"

The magister glided forward and scrunched down beside him.

"That in order to bathe, you must first actually get into the bath."

Before he could react, the woman shoved him over into the cut basin.

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GLORIA OLIVER

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Jewel
of the
Gods



GLORIA OLIVER



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2015



AUSTIN TX

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JEWEL OF THE GODS

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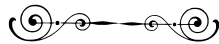
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To Karla and Scott

Who truly seem to enjoy telling others I write books
even though I make a living with numbers.

CHAPTER 1



“LAND HO!”

Red looked up from where he and Lucas were dragging the last of the backup rope to the lower deck and tried to spot it for himself. Although he'd traveled the seas since he was ten and served on this ship for the same amount of time, only recently had the *Sea Dragon* ventured farther out than the familiar ports of Mulatia, Land of the Thirteen Kingdoms.

A brisk wind swept his shoulder-length red hair about his face and tickled his beard as it filled their sails to bursting, as if as eager to help them to their destination as they were to get there. Squinting against the sun's glare on the water, he saw a glimmer in the distance. It wasn't a gradually rising shimmer, as would be the case with most of the Mulatian ports; this one seemed bigger, taller. The first indication this was nothing like home.

“So, what do you think they'll be like?” Lucas stood next to him, staring off in the same direction, the side of his hand pressed against his tanned forehead to cut out some of the glare.

“What who will be like?” Red strained to make out more of what lay ahead, wanting to miss nothing on the possibly one-time trip. The *Sea Dragon* was only here because increasing pirate traffic had almost gotten Captain Murdock's *Lady's Grace* sunk. The Dunlap Trading Company had been desperate to get the salvaged goods to their destina-

tion as soon as possible or forfeit their lucrative contract to Wasef. If the gods smiled on them, the *Sea Dragon* would prove its worth to Dunlap and perhaps share the route with *Lady's Grace* in future.

"Why, the women, of course, fool." Lucas snorted. "Who else?"

Red glanced back at him, women being one of his favorite subjects.

"Don't rightly know, but it'll sure be fun to find out."

"Not if you don't get back to work, you won't." Captain Garrett stared down at them from the upper deck. The smile on his face belied his words, Garrett as excited as any of them about the new port and the opportunities it might open for their futures.

As the second and third mates, Red and Lucas weren't actually on duty at the moment, not that that ever stopped the captain from expecting them to pitch in when necessary. Red had already done the deck check and helped Lucas make sure everything had been secured in preparation for making landfall.

He bounded up to the upper deck as the captain raised his spyglass for a look ahead.

"Can you make out anything, sir?"

Garrett was silent for several long moments, giving the impression that, indeed, he could. Red knew from long experience the captain would not be hurried, so he kept his gaze glued to the horizon to pick up what little he could on his own.

The glimmer he'd spotted before had spread, slowly giving him a sense of the nearing coastline.

"It is everything they said it would be..."

Red shot a glance at his captain, never having heard awe in the man's voice before. It only fed his own curiosity as to what they were about to encounter. That the first mate was below, snoring in his hammock, rather than up here trying to catch a preview of what was coming, Red didn't understand but was grateful for it. It was the only reason he could be up here hoping for a turn on the glass.

Without another word, Garret passed the telescope over to him. Not one to waste the opportunity, Red instantly raised the spyglass to his eye.

A large bay solidified in his enhanced view. White froth warned of unseen coral reefs beneath the waves, yet a section beckoned between two lighthouses rising from the sea. One was made to look

like a rising pillar of flame in gold, orange, and yellow; the other a whirlwind of air in blue, white, and silver.

Beyond them, he glimpsed merchant ships, then red sandstone cliffs that rose on both sides of the mouth of a wide river. In the lower corners of the cliffs, where the river met the sea, two more lighthouses stood, except they were larger than their brothers and on opposite sides, rising in the same brilliant colors.

But even they weren't what froze the air in his throat and made him stare.

The cliffs stood six hundred lengths, and from the look of it, the city lay nestled inside them, through them. Homes and businesses tunneled and shaped within the solid stone, with five levels of stucco facades in all manner of colors and shapes. There were balconies with iron rod railings, some trailing vines of ivy in the higher levels; and moss covered the walls closer to the base. Wide rope-hung bridges with telltale streamers connected the two sides of the cliffs and the river, dots of pedestrians moving to and fro on them. Strange basket contraptions rose up and down on the cliffs' sides.

And atop it all on the left, one last lighthouse rose as if reaching for the sky, made of the same sandstone as the cliffs.

"Makes sense now why Murdock was being such a bloody blackguard about us going on this trip instead of him," the captain murmured. "I'd not give up easily on this myself."

Red nodded, lowering the glass, finally understanding why some called this port "the Jewel of the Gods." It'd been worth coming all this way just to see it.

Garrett took back the glass and raised it to his eye again. His eagerness turning into a sharp need, Red decided this was as good a time as any for him to make his move.

"Sir, have you made a decision on who's to take our papers to the embassy yet?"

Murdock might not have been happy with the fact he'd lost this voyage to them; but when Dunlap asked, he'd still produced for them a quick map on how to find the embassy and the names of a few key people, like the quartermaster's, and what they might expect on landing. Red brought his voice down to a whisper.

"It'd sure make a nice reward to a fine fellow who covered for his captain when a certain lord inquired about his whereabouts on a particular night a month or two ago."

Garrett's trysts with the Lady Rilan were the old man's only vice; otherwise he was as boring and straight as an oar. Yet this one thing had almost gotten him chained and thrown into a pit to rot. Lord Rilan wasn't one to do things halfway.

The captain gave him a half-glare then studied him up and down.

"You've proven yourselves able this trip, so I suppose I should encourage that. But if you or Lucas get us blacklisted in this port for your usual antics, I'll have your heads. Understand?"

"Of course, captain."

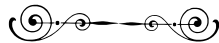
Red half-turned and grinned down at his fellow officer and friend. Lucas extended his leg and removed an imaginary hat from his blond head as he gave Garrett a deep bow.

"We shall take your admonitions to heart, my captain." He then shook his head of tight curls with an innocent, hurt look plastered on his face. "Though why you would ever feel the need to make such a statement, I will never understand."

The seamen on deck all started laughing at once, winks and jabbing elbows making the rounds.

Garrett groaned, obviously already regretting his decision. It only made Red's grin grow wider.

CHAPTER 2



“I’M IN.” RED LEANED back against the wooden bar, a nice buzz ringing in his head from the spiced mead served by the locals. He wiped a bit of foam from his neatly trimmed beard.

Lucas gave him a pleased, lopsided grin.

“Okay, just so we perfectly understand each other—the stake is twenty slivers.”

Red nodded, his gaze following a yellow vein in the red sandstone walls around them. This was the first time he’d been in a tavern made from a hole in a cliff. The crudely formed wooden tables and benches, pitted and cut by the waves of mostly foreign customers over time, however, were like any he might have run across in Mulatian ports. The smell of sweat and watered ale were the same as well, even if the over-spiced scent of the cheap food curled his nose hairs.

But the walls, the ceiling...

He took a slow sip from his mug.

As amazed as he’d been when he’d gazed at the port through the spyglass, he’d been more so when one of the men at the embassy told them this port was the only point of contact with outsiders for the small country of Wasef. He didn’t know enough yet about the place to guess if it was in order to protect their way of life or some hidden reason.

“You’ll have a count of a thousand to make your move.” Lucas leaned in close, his curls circling his handsome tanned face. “Only a thousand. And the time starts the moment you open your mouth.”

Red waved the stipulation away as inconsequential. He slid Lucas a questioning glance.

“Anything else?”

This was a game the two of them played often. It was yet to be seen whether it was a boon or disaster that he’d drawn first round in this new, unknown place. The possibility of danger and adventure, however, gave it points to the positive.

“Oh, I think things will be difficult enough as they stand, my friend.” Lucas winked, not entirely steady on his feet. “The first one through the doorway should do.”

As if summoned by his words, the strings of beads over the entrance parted as a cowled figure came inside. When the person hesitated, Red stood up straighter and tugged down on his vest. Even though the newcomer was covered in brownish-red cloth from head to foot, it was hard to disguise the unique gait of a woman, if you knew what to look for.

She ventured farther into the room, turning her head as her hidden gaze traveled over the different groups of foreigners currently taking their leisure there. Three Almirians sat sourly at a corner table, ignoring everyone else, their orange-stained skin clashing with the natural color of the sandstone. Four Boldovians in steel and furs were taking turns arm-wrestling anyone who came near. A loud clump of laughing and drinking Trillian workers, turbans and loincloths wrapped in intricate patterns over their bodies, took up the left wall.

Red waited until she looked in his direction and gave her his most elaborate bow. Watching Lucas and his efforts to woo all the women in the land did have advantages.

“Madam, I am new to these waters, and you seem a kindly soul. Might I buy you some refreshment in exchange for a few moments of your time?”

The woman’s head tilted at his words, and he felt her gaze roam over him. It occurred to him she might not have understood him. Perhaps his smile would do what his words had not. He sauntered closer.

He wasn’t sure if it was the strong mead, the unfamiliar atmosphere, or the fact this was the first woman he’d ever approached not belonging to the Thirteen Kingdoms; but it was like advancing on a

bastion of power, he a mere horseman faced with the immensity of a closed keep. Then the feeling was gone. She looked up at him, and his green eyes met dark-brown ones.

“From my spirit to yours.”

She made a sweeping gesture with her hand from her chest toward his. Red had seen the sign before and knew it for a greeting but hadn’t heard it spoken in his language before. He had no idea how to respond.

“Uhm, yes, you as well.”

“Your hair is quite unusual. What is your name?” Her voice was deep and rich.

“Red. Everyone calls me Red.”

Her intense gaze rested on his shoulder-length hair for a moment.

“Would you be surprised to hear that I was led to you?”

His brow rose, as he wondered if perhaps she’d had more to drink than he. A bet was a bet, though, and no way would Lucas accept excuses. Plus, Red hated to lose.

“My hair does make me rather hard to miss.”

“Yes, red is a good portent when taken as representing fire. Fire burns, cleans, exposes. It is an excellent omen.” She looked pleased. “The elements have guided me wisely.”

Was it going to be this easy? She sounded like a nutter, but a lay was a lay, and a bet was a bet. It didn’t hurt that his toes tingled at the possibility of things unexpected.

His hair color *was* rather uncommon, especially in the southern portions of Mulatia. It had previously given him an edge here and there with the women—and against Lucas’s oozing charm he needed all the assistance he could get—but never this much. It would be a new record. He guessed his kind were even rarer out in the world than he imagined. Or she was truly drunk.

“I have a skiff tied outside. Shall we go?”

Choking sounds and the clatter of a dropped mug echoed from behind him. Red threw his friend a quick look over his shoulder and grinned.

“Sounds good.” He slipped the woman’s arm through his. “What should I call you?”

She leaned in close, using her cowl to conceal her lips as she spoke only loudly enough for him to hear.

“Ylis. My name is Ylis.”

He thought the whole process rather odd, as no one was looking their way, but made no comment. He didn’t know the customs of this city. It was half of what made this game better than ever before.

The scents of river and sea swirled around them as they stepped outside. The sun was already below the horizon, and most of the light had fled the sky, leaving a field of purple and black. The noise at this, the lowest level of the cliff face, was now but a murmur compared to what it’d been during daylight.

A lamp outside the bar lit the path cut into the cliff, the same as the businesses. It revealed a covered skiff on the far side, tied to one of the narrow floating docks that extended up and down the waterway. A small lantern hung suspended from the sweeping neck at the front of the skiff, imitating the other boats parked or moving along the Tanu River. The mass of them gave the impression of a multitude of fireflies buzzing over the water.

Red hopped down to the dock and extended a hand to help his companion. He spotted a fleeting smile as she ignored this and, with incredibly light feet, bounced down to the dock and then the boat without hardly disturbing either. He had the sudden feeling she might end up being a handful. He was rather looking forward to it.

As he climbed onto the skiff, Ylis signaled to a brown-skinned man at the stern then lifted the flap of the covered area in the middle and slipped inside. Red made sure there was no one else within first then followed.

He felt the boat separate from the dock and slide upriver. He frowned at the last as he sat down on a bench across his companion, trying to remember if the current of the river had seemed fast or slow when he’d looked at it before. A delicate wrought iron lamp hung from the arch of the covering but didn’t flicker like a normal flame would. Beneath it, on what would be the center of the boat, was embedded a round piece of lapis lazuli. Winding carvings colored in blue extended forward and aft on the spine of the boat.

Ylis noticed what he was looking at.

“Though I have heard it is different in other lands, here we follow the Wisdom of the All. Fire, earth, water, air, spirit—each with its strengths and weaknesses, each made more by the others and ourselves.

“The boat is tied to the water with these, and also to its owner. Together, they overcome the usual limitations and flow upstream.”

Red stared. She was talking about magic! He'd encountered it here and there in the different kingdoms in Mulatia, some fake, some real, but theirs came from the gods not the elements. And to have it being used on a skiff, of all things! Might be something worth investigating for the *Sea Dragon*. Being able to move against a current would be an awesome feat, indeed.

Ylis pulled her cowl back allowing Red to see her face fully for the first time. Her features were plain, thin lips and a wide nose on tan skin not making her particularly comely. Yet he still found himself strangely excited, for this woman was like none he'd seen. She wore no paints, no enhancements, and she had no hair. Her head was totally bald.

Although he'd been in port a few hours, he'd seen no one who looked like her before. Hairstyles for the women here seemed to vary by age, the young wearing it loose to their shoulders, those a little older in a multitude of braids and coiled into loops. The few wizened women he'd come across wore but one braid in a graying loop. None had been hairless. What did that make her?

On the right side of her face, swirling black tattoos covered her cheek and ear. A sense of presence surrounded her, which felt more intense in the enclosed space. There would definitely be stories to tell once this dalliance was over.

"Where are we going?"

"Not far." Ylis rolled back one of her dark sleeves. "I thought we should have some privacy for our business."

Red's evaluating gaze noticed her arm wasn't bare but rather sported runes in varied colors that continued to the unseen skin beneath her sleeve. He couldn't tell if they were tattoos or only paint. Just what other enticing secrets lay hidden beneath the folds of her robe?

"This is your first time in Syrras, is it not?" She brought out a small box from beneath her bench and set it beside her.

"It is. We just arrived today. Haven't really had a chance to look around much."

"Truly? The One Spirit is generous indeed this night."

She opened the box, and nestled within were bottles full of colors. She took out a small brush and removed the tops from three of the paints.

"Why is that?" Red never minded some conversation, but this one seemed a little odd. Maybe he should have learned more about the

culture before just diving into this. But the thrill would have been less.

There was always a chance she might be part of a press gang and planned to kidnap him, although with her plain face, it seemed unlikely, despite how desperate for female companionship they might believe men who'd just come into port might be. He had his knife and his wits, and had seen and tussled with enough bandits in his home ports to know the signs. He was getting nothing like that from her so far, although she was definitely a strange one. He'd have tales to take back and share with the others.

Ylis smiled, but her gaze never left the brush as she dipped it with great care into the reddest red he'd ever seen.

"All will be new to you. You won't already have preconceptions to cloud your judgment."

Red frowned. "Cloud my judgment on what?"

Were women like her taboo, perhaps? Or would there be some stigma attached to him for going with her he didn't know about?

The brush tip touched the end of the strange runes and figures on her exposed arm. The paint seemed to glow for a moment then totally vanished from the brush as if it had never been there. She then dipped the tip into a deep brown color with odd sparkles of light. Red found his gaze trapped by it.

"Why are you here, Red?" Her voice had deepened, but it was hard to tell if it was from rising desire, concentration, or something else entirely.

"Here in this city, or here as in 'with you'?" He was feeling more sober by the minute.

Additional swirls and runes formed on her wrist. New colors joined the first two.

"Yes."

"It's what I do. The sea is my life." He shrugged, his gaze still locked on her arm. "Coming here was a great opportunity, a chance to see new places, new people. And after weeks at sea, like any other man, I crave a little entertainment."

"Forthright as well. Most interesting..." The runes extended over her palm.

Red forced his gaze away from it.

"What's this about? Obviously, you have something different in mind than I do. A shame, really..." If this was some strange ruse to

rob him, they'd be disappointed. He'd not been paid for this part of the voyage yet.

He felt behind him for the knife tucked in his belt against his back. It did seem like a lot of trouble for just one lone sailor, though, for either a press gang or thievery. He should have definitely paid more attention to the rumors and gossip about this place while at the embassy, even if it would have curbed some of the excitement.

"Indulge me a moment longer, if you would. Everything will become clear presently." Ylis sounded distracted.

The enclosed space suddenly seemed too pressing. With a glance behind him, Red estimated how far he would have to roll backward to win clear of the covering. Then it would only be a short hop to dive into the water and be free of this strangeness.

With a satisfied sigh, Ylis placed the brush back inside the box and closed the lid. She shifted slightly and turned to look up at him. Her gaze met his, and Red got the uncomfortable feeling she knew his thoughts. Just what had he gotten himself into?

"Look." She moved her hand so the palm faced in his direction. "It is complete."

Despite his growing misgivings, he did as she asked. Swirls of blue and gold surrounded a ring of silver. Inside it, centered on her palm, was an eye.

It blinked.

Cold chills rushed to cover his arms with gooseflesh; he hadn't the faintest idea how a drawing could do such a thing.

"By the Kings, what is..."

Ylis leaned forward, her palm lashing out. It struck him dead in the center of the chest.

Red fell off the bench onto his back but barely noticed. His chest burned with cold and fire where she'd touched him, and faster than the ripples of water that formed from a thrown rock, the sensation spread through his whole body. He tried to move, to scream, but all was denied him. He could feel things within and without shifting—his bones, his muscles, his skin—as if his body had become self-aware and decided to change.

Then, all at once, it stopped.

"It is done."

Feeling that his body was his again, Red tried to squirm away from her.

“What is done? What did you do?”

Something wasn't right here. His voice sounded strange. The pitch was too high. His back smacked against the middle pole holding up the entryway. Using it for leverage, he stumbled to his feet. His right hand reached for his knife; the weapon seemed heavier than it should. He felt shaky and weak.

Fear grew in a tight kernel in his belly, although he wasn't yet sure what was going on.

“Tell me what you did! Why do I feel like this?”

“You are what you could have been had your fate been different. Look.” Ylis didn't hold her palm up like before but instead nodded toward him. Red glanced at her hand anyway and saw that all the paint and runes were gone. More magic!

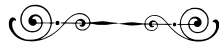
He brought the knife up higher. It was then he noticed his hand. The blade looked larger than it should have in comparison. Then he realized the knife was not the problem, it was the hand. It wasn't his!

Staring down at himself, he realized he was shorter, that his clothes hung on him loosely. Instead of the chest with the soft coating of red hair women enjoyed running their fingers through, beneath his sagging shirt he was hairless and sported a set of small, perky breasts.

He swallowed hard, a part of his mind screaming in denial. His breath came in short shallow gasps as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing. His eyes lost focus, his brain numbed as it fought to understand the impossible.

The interior of the skiff spun around him. A bone-deep weariness abruptly swept through him, as if he'd spent days swabbing the deck and fighting pirates. Blackness crowded the edges of his vision then swooped in, and although he fought internally to remain conscious, that, too, was soon denied him.

CHAPTER 3



RED SAT UP, a scream scratching at his throat. Cold sweat beaded his brow; his body shaking from effect of the unbelievable nightmare. No more spiced foreign mead for him—never again. It wasn't worth this.

His gaze focused, and he realized he didn't know where he was. There was no scent of salt, or the sound of lapping waves against the hull. Instead of a berth and wooden walls, he found himself in a narrow room made of sandstone. Light trickled in through the rough doorway and showed him he was sitting on a woven mat covered by a thin blanket.

He gasped as the realization the nightmare might be real splashed over him. Not wanting to, yet finding he possessed no other choice, Red looked down at himself. The body he saw was not his own.

Everything was smaller, more delicate. He wasn't even a man anymore—a quick, awkward check of his attributes brought home that fact like an anchor dropping at port. The only thing that felt normal was his hair, which was still as red and thick as ever. He also still had his hard-earned tan, the pale skin he'd been born with tending to burn and its current state a work of long years. His arms and legs were well defined from doing heavy work but still seemed different because of the packaging.

It was as if his mother had given birth to a girl instead of a boy.

The woman Ylis's final words echoed once more in his head—*You are what you could have been had your fate been different.*

His mind revolted against such a thing being possible. Panic gathered at the corners of his soul. His breathing grew labored, and the room started to spin.

“No!” Red smashed his small fist against his thigh. He focused on the pain, glad he could feel it, knowing fainting would gain him nothing. But what was he going to do about this madness?

A shadow filled the doorway.

“Ah, I see you're awake.”

Red shot to his feet, recognizing the figure only too well—it was Ylis. The thin blanket covering him fell forgotten to the floor.

“You witch! Why have you done this to me? Change me back right now!”

Totally ignoring his outburst, she inspected his naked form from top to toe.

“The transformation was a total success. You feel healthy, yes? Nothing hurts?”

Red took a step toward her, his bare feet slapping against the cool stone floor.

“None of that matters. Change me back this instant!”

Ylis stared him dead in the face, her expression calm. “I will not.”

Heat flushed through Red as his anger flamed to rage.

“You will!” Despite his nakedness and the fact he had no weapon, he threw himself at her. His center of gravity wasn't quite right, but this was only a fleeting thought in the far reaches of his mind. He wanted his life back, his body back, and this woman was denying it to him.

Ylis flowed forward, her sleeves flaring as she expertly intercepted him in mid-leap, flipped him, and thumped him down hard, one hand behind his head to keep it from hitting the floor.

Although his back and buttocks stung from smacking the stone, Red heaved with all his might to get back up. Ylis's open palm smashed into his midriff, driving out all of his air.

“Calm yourself. Violence will gain you nothing.”

Red was in no shape to comment. He struggled to regain his breath, glaring his displeasure at her, since he could do little else.

“Your new condition will not be permanent.” She stared at him, concern clearly showing on her face. “Please listen to what I have to say. You'll then understand why things have come to be as they are.”

She let him go and backed away then sat down cross-legged in the doorway. Still wheezing, Red turned on his side and slowly sat up. His new body was weak. He wasn't sure just exactly what kind of fighting style the woman had used, but it shouldn't have been that easy for her to overpower him. If he'd had his real body, it wouldn't have been. Or so he told himself.

The situation only got worse by the moment.

“Say whatever it is you have to say, witch. But it'll change nothing.”

“Thank you.”

Ylis nodded in his direction and tucked her hands into her sleeves, as if trying to reassure him.

Red reached over for the discarded blanket and wrapped it about his lower half to keep his skin from the chilly floor.

“Just get on with it.”

If she got distracted enough telling her tale, perhaps he'd get an opportunity to have at her again. His shape might be different, but he still knew how to hurt people. She'd caught him by surprise before.

Ylis nodded again then seemed to take a moment to gather her thoughts before beginning.

“A very delicate situation has arisen in Syrras recently. A tragedy has occurred, one which should never have happened. Which I should not have allowed to happen.” She paused for a moment, a fleeting look of pain crossing her face. “I am Grand Magister Ylis. I serve He Who is Most Honored by the Gods, Orthos Cloaustrain Lorraxia Tumil.”

The string of names meant absolutely nothing to him.

“Who?”

The magister's brows gathered for a moment.

“I believe his position would be equivalent to your term of king.”

Red barked a laugh, surprised by the answer.

“And servants of the king just go around kidnapping foreign sailors and turning them into girls? For what? His Royal Pleasure?”

Ylis's face lost all expression. Her voice turned cold.

“His Magnificence is dead. Including you, there are only four people in this world who are aware of that grievous fact.”

This brought Red up short, all thoughts of violence momentarily forgotten.

“You’re not making any sense. What does that have to do with me? And with this?” He pointed at his changed body, suppressing a shudder as he was forced to acknowledge the changes yet again.

Ylis raised a hand to forestall any further questions. Red was glad to note there were no drawings on her palm, especially of creepy blinking eyes.

“The Highest of the High died in his sleep less than one of your weeks ago. She Who Sits on the Most Honored’s Right, Lyara Orthos Tumil, discovered him thus before the servants arrived to awaken him. She contacted me immediately, and I was able to ascertain the Most High didn’t die of natural causes, though it very much appeared so. I am still working to identify the exact poison used to arrange his demise.”

Red shook his head, his face twisting with distaste. Poison was a coward’s weapon. He’d once seen the effects of bane’s blood on a fellow sailor who’d boasted a little too much about his conquests to the wrong ears. White foam had filled his mouth and fallen from his lips as blood blossoms formed all over his face and arms. He’d fallen twitching to the floor and within minutes breathed no more. It was a ghastly way to go.

“If it left no external trace on the body, how do you know it was poison?”

Ylis’s brow rose.

“I am a magister,” she said, as if this were the only explanation required.

“I see...” He changed positions, finding the hard stone quite uncomfortable. Ylis never moved, appearing to be able to maintain the same pose till the end of time. It annoyed him. “I still don’t see how this has anything to do with me.”

“The death of His Magnificence must be kept secret for the time being. However, those involved in the original poisoning will realize something hasn’t gone as planned as all they continue to hear is that the Most High has taken ill. They will surely attempt something else, so there is very little time to find the truth.

“At the moment, the Most Blessed is doing her utmost to keep things balanced and the Most High’s true condition secret. Yet the Most Blessed needs to be kept safe, and the culprits need to be found. The majority of my energies, however, are diverted elsewhere, so alternate means to do this had to be found. This is why you’re involved.”

Red could say nothing for several seconds, totally stunned.

“What? Are you saying you did this to me because you need a lousy watchdog to sniff out the killer and protect the queen? What about the royal guards? You must have plenty of people who work for you that are more than capable of solving the crime!”

Ylis shook her head.

“It is not as simple as that. Please understand, we have no idea how the Highest was poisoned. He was surrounded by his most trusted people at all times, yet it was done. It was even likely committed by one of them.” Her gaze locked with his. “Too much is at stake due to matters I don’t have time to speak of now. As things stand, we can afford to trust no one. Only to a person such as yourself, who has never been here, who has little to no knowledge of our people or our city, someone who is not involved, dare we risk giving our confidence.”

“If a stranger is all you needed, then why all this? Why change me?”

The left corner of Ylis’s lips curved up.

“This has not been left to mere chance. Through the use of meditation and spells, the All guided me to you. And who would believe someone who looks like you do now capable of much of anything? It is to our advantage.”

Red stood up, holding his blanket tighter about him, humiliated by her words despite the fact this new body wasn’t his.

“You’re insane.”

She nodded, conceding the fact.

“The change is also something that can be held over you, to force you to cooperate. Trust can always be bought away, but not if there is something the person needs, something the other side cannot possibly provide.” She stared at him intently, obviously interested in how he would react to this.

Red felt his anger returning.

“Kidnapping, extortion—you think these tactics are going to make me want to help you?”

She shocked him by bowing to the floor.

“I endanger everything by telling you what I have, for though it may seem as if I have the upper hand, the wrongs I’ve done you will only restrain you so far. Once we leave here, it would be nothing for you to spill our secret and bring us all to ruin before I could stop you.”

He stared at her bowed head in surprise, already having decided he would do whatever he could to get away from her. Screaming what she'd told him out at the top of his lungs had definitely been an option. Someone out there would understand him. And she was aware of it, yet had taken the risk anyway. It only served to make all this even more confusing.

“We are desperate, or we wouldn't be doing as we are. There is much you do not know or understand, and as I've said, I have no time to explain. The longer we remain here, the longer she is alone and the greater chance there is our charade will be discovered.”

“Change me back and I might consider helping you. I might even keep silent about the things you've told me.” He knew he had no real leverage to make her do anything, but he hated having his hands tied. This whole thing was ludicrous. It made no sense they had to go to extremes like this.

Ylis straightened back up and slowly shook her head.

“I cannot. The energy and preparation for what was done to you took days to put together. The divinations to uselessly try to determine who did the deed and then to find you have drained me even more. I am at my limit.”

She stood up. For the first time, Red noticed the faint dark circles under her eyes, the lines of strain on her face.

“All I can give is being diverted elsewhere.” She lifted her robe off her right leg, where an incredibly complex set of drawings wound up her flesh, continuing past the raised hem. What that spell was for, he had no idea.

“Only once the current trouble has been averted will I be able to change you back.”

Red frowned, not sure if he should believe her. Aside from being vague, her explanations sounded contrived and convenient.

“I swear by the One Spirit and the All you shall be as you were once the threat is past.” Her gaze locked with his again. “But that will only happen if you help us.”

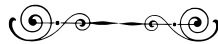
None of it made sense. Even as she denied him, she begged for his trust and aid. Was the situation worse than she'd said so they couldn't risk trusting anyone without strings? He'd seen enough backstabbing in the merchant business to know words only bound most men as long as it was convenient.

His mouth turned further down. He liked this less and less.

“Your gods mean nothing to me, but hear me and hear me well. I will help you, and if, by the heavens and earth and all the gods and people in between, you don’t come through on your word, there is no place in this world or the next where you will be safe from me.”

And if, in the meantime, he found a way to get out of this without having to wait for her, so much the better.

CHAPTER 4



“SO, WHAT HAPPENS NOW?”

Having capitulated, or appearing to anyway, Red sat down heavily on the floor. Ylis straightened.

“Now you bathe. After, you will dress.”

Red sighed. He’d hoped for a little more to go on. He already felt it in his bones this woman would never actually explain anything to his satisfaction. Getting information from her was like prying barnacles from the bottom of the ship.

“I don’t need a bath. I washed quite thoroughly a couple of days ago, thank you.” He sniffed beneath his new pits, just in case.

“The state of the body affects the spirit. You will bathe.” She gestured with her open palm in the direction of the doorway, inviting him to go through first. She looked capable of waiting him out all day if need be.

Grumbling under his breath about the stupidity of it, he got up and stomped toward the opening. As he stepped over the threshold, it occurred to him he could run, this being one of the times she’d spoken of when she’d be unable to stop him if he attempted to gain his freedom. It wasn’t as if he’d actually given his word not to try to get out of it. He’d been coerced into saying he would help, so no rules would apply.

Yet even as the ideas and arguments formed, he dismissed them. He was naked and in the form of a young female. How far could he make it in such a state? Showing up bare at the *Sea Dragon*, if he could manage to get that far, would earn him nothing but having to fend off about three-quarters of the crew. All, like him, had been a long time without female company of any kind.

From what he'd seen, this female version of himself had all the proper equipment and was not unpleasant to look at. He doubted the skags would stop and listen long enough for him to tell his tale, let alone believe it, before they dragged him below decks for some recreation. Not that there wouldn't be many broken noses and busted private jewels, if he had any say about it.

His mood souring, Red surveyed the new room. Like the one he'd woken up in, it was mostly bare. A small hole an arm's length up the left wall spewed a trickle of water, which collected in a deep rectangular basin carved into the floor then drained out through a slightly smaller hole at the bottom. A bowl beside the basin held a comb, a bar smelling of flowers, and a square piece of cloth.

Ignoring the bowl and its contents, he pulled off the blanket and squatted next to the water. He dipped his small hands into the cool liquid, just wanting to get this over with, and liberally flicked some of it onto his new body.

"It would seem you do not quite understand the concept of bathing."

Red glanced back over his shoulder, wondering at her semi-amused tone.

"What are you implying?"

The magister glided forward and scrunched down beside him.

"That in order to bathe, you must first actually get into the bath."

Before he could react, the woman shoved him over into the cut basin.

"Hey! There was no need for that!" The water smelled of minerals and was almost cold.

Fresh water didn't get wasted aboard ship. Only when in port was there a chance of frequenting a bath house, and there the water was at least warm.

Ylis chuckled softly as she set each item out from the bowl as he splashed about in indignation. She then took the empty container and filled it with water from the basin.

“Secondly, you actually have to get wet.” She dumped the contents of the bowl over his head.

Red opened his mouth to protest, only to sputter as Ylis dumped even more water over him. The bar and cloth went into the clear liquid for a moment and then came back out to glide in an apparent frenzy all over his body, guided by the magister’s hand. The more he tried to avoid her ministrations, the more covered he got. It felt awkward and strange, as if he were a baby, and he didn’t like it.

He tried to get out of the basin several times but was always pushed back. He was panting with exertion by the time Ylis stopped. The bar and cloth were put away, but the bowl returned, drenching him all over.

Coughing and trying not to swallow any more water, he didn’t resist when the magister took his arm and helped him out. A towel fell on his head, and he stiffened as it was rigorously swept over his hair and then the rest of his body.

At some other time, in some other place, it might have been erotic, but the no-nonsense all-business feel of it only made it insulting.

“Enough!” Red stumbled away, having had his fill.

Ylis inclined her head in his direction.

“You’re not quite dry, but if that is your wish.” She set the towel down and picked up the comb. “If you do not know how to use this, I can take care of it for you as well.” Her eyes were filled with wry delight.

He stomped over and took the comb from her hand.

“That won’t be necessary.” Fuming, he sat down on the thin blanket and fussed with his unruly curls. Such overrated nonsense!

Ylis moved around the room, but Red paid her no attention. He swept the back of his hand over his chin, and then cursed at the smoothness there. He wanted his beard back!

“Put these on when you’re done. The white garments go on first.”

Red pushed his hair back and glanced at the bundle she’d set before him. Tentatively, he reached for the item on top. It felt slick to the touch and looked to be an undergarment. With a grunt, he stood up and made to put it on. It was a lot fancier in feel and stitch than the braies his people wore, with their drawstrings and laces. A technique like this would have potential back home, the potential for a good deal of profit. Perhaps this little unwanted adventure of his might have side benefits.

The second undergarment was a short shift of the same silky material. It felt quite nice against his skin.

Next came a sky-blue skirt with stitching in gold, red, brown, and white, which reached past his knees. It felt strange, the open feeling totally different from breeches. A shirt of the same color as the skirt and with the same embroidery was the final piece. There were pads at the shoulder and elbows, making him wonder if the light clothing were somehow actually meant for combat. He just couldn't quite figure out how.

"Men are of angles, women of curves."

Red glanced up at Ylis and found the amused look back on her face.

"What?"

"The reason for the padding—to round out a woman's angles into curves. To better show their differences, although they are part of the same whole."

He was a man in a woman's body. What did that make him?

"This cloak is for you as well. It would be best if you and your distinctive hair were not seen too early." She handed him a thin cloak of the same dark brownish-red as her own. "And if you will slip these on, we can be on our way."

She set out a pair of gold-colored sandals on the floor. He put them on, the delicate things feeling as odd as all the rest of the clothing.

The magister turned and led the way out as soon as Red looked ready. Taking a deep breath, he followed her. He had clothes, so one problem with escaping no longer existed. He just needed a bit of luck, and he would run.

The bathing room ran into another bare room of rock and another after that. Yet each room was filled with light. More light than could be coming from wherever the entrance to this place might be. Curious, Red let his gaze roam about, trying to satisfy the seeming quandary.

He spotted openings in the ceiling that looked brighter than the ambient light in the room. He stepped over so he could walk beneath one of them and looked up. Something glinted down at him, like a reflection from water. Was it more magic? Or was actual sunlight somehow filtering inside?

Syrras was a city built on the sides of cliffs, the housing and stores architectural marvels, things he doubted the engineers back home could reproduce easily. This could be more of the same.

A couple more rooms, and they were outside. Red blinked from the stronger light, the sun glaring brightly above them. Across the wide Tanu River, he spotted the sandstone cliff on the other side, which at this point was a mere two stories in height. To the left, the river moved downstream toward the bay, and the cliff walls rose to their full six stories filled with balconies, rope bridges, lifts and curtains of trailing ivy.

Unlike the view from the bay, here he could see manicured trees as well as several wide buildings with colorful facades set on top of the cliff. Farther upstream, the land changed to grasslands filled with what he thought might be horses, cattle, and other herd animals. Farther still, he thought he could see cultivated fields and farms.

Ylis descended a very narrow flight of steps cut into the rock after shifting her cowl to hide her face. Below them, tied to a battered post, was the same skiff they'd ridden in the night before. A brown-skinned man stood waiting by the tiller, but Red couldn't tell if it was the same one as before or not. She greeted the boatman with the same phrase she'd used the night before and the man returned it automatically. Red didn't deign to do the same.

He glanced up and down the stone walkway, but there was no one else about. He thought of making a run for it then found the magister staring at him intently, as if waiting to see what he would do, and not looking the least bit worried. What else had she done to him he didn't know about? Was she baiting him on purpose?

He decided he would wait.

Red got a feeling of *déjà vu* as Ylis once more held the flap for him to enter the covered part of the boat. Hopefully, there would be no magic on this trip. He'd already had more than his fill.

He'd barely sat down, fussing with his strange and odd-feeling clothes, when the small craft left the safety of the wooden dock and turned in to follow the current downstream. Red inched forward, taking a peek past the tied flaps on the front.

Skiffs and a few barges navigated the glistening water, sailors calling out greetings to one another in the land's guttural tongue. Both the wooden docks and the carved shelf at the waterline had people moving back and forth on them. Men and women mixed freely, and he did notice the women wearing pads to "soften their edges," as Ylis had said. Skin tones ranged from tan to deep brown, and the majority of the populace dressed in bright colors.

He'd already noted the age-definitive hairstyles the women wore. As for the men, most seemed to favor thin mustaches or neatly trimmed beards and goatees. Older men wore wide sideburns, even those with no hair left on their heads.

Overall, from what little he could see, those living in the Jewel of the Gods were a healthy, lively people. He saw only one or two foreigners this far upriver. Despite its importance as a port and connection to other lands, stories said the Wasefans enjoyed their privacy and did not mix freely with outsiders. It only added to the strangeness of his having been chosen.

The skiff wove past several other boats and slipped up to one of the floating docks on the right.

"Red."

He looked back over his shoulder to find the magister standing. Realizing they were about to disembark and join the throng of people beyond, he felt his stomach tighten.

"I have one last thing for you before we make our way." She held out an amulet strung on a cord. "This will help you understand our language and that of others. But you must keep it where it always touches your skin."

Red stared at it but didn't take it. More blasted magic. He'd had enough for a lifetime already. The amulet was a square with a silver circle, like the one drawn for the spell that had changed him to what he was now. He felt his skin crawl on his shoulders. In the center of the circle was a small diamond.

"Take it." Ylis pushed it closer to him. "If you cannot understand what is being said, how do you propose to be able to discover what you must?"

He squinted, not happy with her logic, no matter how right it might be.

"What else does it do?"

"Nothing else." The amused look was back in her eyes.

If she was lying, he could always ditch the thing the moment he got away. Hesitating only a heartbeat more, he finally reached for the offered item and slipped it over his head. With a hard swallow, he tucked it beneath the silky shift until the amulet lay against his skin.

Although he'd expected some kind of weird reaction or sensation, aside from just feeling like any other necklace he might have worn, it did nothing.

“Come.”

Ylis moved to the back of the skiff. He followed. The magister took his hand then quickly led him off the boat onto the floating dock and up to the walk. Red’s shortened stature caused him problems, but Ylis seemed under no such constraints, tugging him up toward the lip with little effort.

They cut into the stream of pedestrians, Red following closely in Ylis’s wake. He struggled to stay near, knowing he could easily lose her in the flowing crowd with his new, less than ideal height.

He then cursed himself for a fool. Here was his chance. All he had to do was hang back, and he would be free of her in moments. If the necklace truly did as she said, he could use it to talk to anyone, get directions, find another magister who could change him back. If he didn’t want to take a chance using it, hand gestures would get him by.

He would find his way back to the *Sea Dragon*, and after he smashed some heads, surely someone would see sense and believe him.

As the thought grew in appeal, though, he realized something else. He’d been ensorcelled by this country’s top magic user, if she was to be believed, with a type of spell he’d never heard tell of. Would any other magister be able to undo her handiwork? Or was it something only the country’s Grand Magister could do?

Not knowing the answer, dare he risk getting stuck like this forever?

No. Not just yet.

The magister turned into a deep cut in the side of the cliff. A wide stair had been carved to the right, crisscrossing upwards. She ascended. Red followed.

They reached a landing on the next level, but Ylis continued going up. As they crossed a second then a third landing, Red noticed the flow of traffic decreasing. Those still on the stairs appeared better dressed, traveling at a more leisurely pace than the business-oriented people on the lower tiers.

Ylis led him off the stairs then stopped in the shadows formed between the clefts in the rock. She pressed Red against the wall, her back to him as if to shield him. Irrationally, he felt his ire rage, the protective gesture grating on his nerves. He was the one to do the protecting.

He tried to shove past her, although he possessed no idea what danger seemingly threatened, if any.

“Be still!”

Ylis’s harsh whisper fell on his ears alone. She pressed back farther, pinning him to the wall. The temperature around them dropped several degrees, and he felt strangely muffled but not threatened. Was this more magic? But why?

He stood on his toes, trying to see past the magister’s shoulder to figure out what drove her to do as she was. He could spot nothing. The citizens of Syrras walked on by, coming and going, seemingly unaware of their presence. Did she believe they were being followed?

His hand itched to hold his knife, but he’d seen no trace of it since he’d awakened. He would have to remedy that.

After some minutes had passed, a man rushed down the stairs in more of a hurry than the others, glancing furtively about as if looking for something. Red couldn’t remember if he’d seen him pass them before. Ylis didn’t react to his presence, so Red had nothing to go on.

After several more tense minutes, the magister stepped back into the light, seemingly satisfied.

“What just happened?” Red kept his voice low, staring about him. “Were we being followed?”

“Perhaps.”

She started forward again, staving off any further questions. Rather than continue up the stairs, however, she led him into a square tunnel into the interior of the cliff. The magister’s pace slowed with the decrease in traffic. Red was, therefore, free to look around a bit more without losing sight of his guide/captor, his curiosity roused at being in a part of the city he would have never dared to venture to before.

As they came to an intersection, he spotted his first guard; there was one at each of the corners. They stood against the wall, their uniforms a blend of colors mirroring the stone behind them. They held full-length spears and carried short curved swords at their sides. One he was sure was a woman. He wondered if the guards were more for decoration, to make the rich feel safe, or if these Syrrans could actually fight.

While on the lowest level hardly any façades were used on the dwellings and the shops facing the exterior, thus leaving the carved rock in its natural hue, up here almost every available surface was covered with plaster. The façades were painted in a multitude of colors, the entrances to the homes and shops surrounded by sculptured columns, creatures of myth, or geometric shapes.

Like the place he'd awakened in earlier, there was more light than there should have been inside such a fortress of stone. He could only guess it was more magic and engineering. He was starting to understand, though, why others might call this city the Jewel of the Gods.

All intersections were well labeled, this particular level comprised of the names of fruits, or so Ylis explained as they continued on. She led him along a seeming maze of passages without hesitation. The farther they went, the more elaborate the façades became. Red's brows rose as he thought he spotted a couple actually adorned with flakes of gold.

Eventually, they reached a broad staircase manned by guards whose bracers were colored with silver. Ylis paid them no attention as she headed for the stairs. The sides of the staircase were embossed with figures representing earth, water, air, fire, and what he thought might be man or perhaps his spirit. The symbols repeated over and over until they reached the end. He couldn't grasp if there was any kind of significance to them or not.

He followed Ylis through more hallways, the five symbols from the staircase everywhere now. The last passage opened into a wide space with a domed ceiling. The floor was tiled with a large silver circle at the center; coiling arms radiated from it as if spinning away, each with a set of three symbol combinations made up from the five. One of the tiles was bordered in silver and contained three columns of fire.

Beyond the open room, directly before them, was a round entrance done in silver, two sets of guards on each side. Ylis headed toward it, throwing back the cowl of her robe. As she did so, the reddish-brown color of the cloth bled away, leaving behind five repeating color bands of brown, red, yellow, blue, and silver.

Red stared at the display of subtle magic, almost forgetting to follow her. She stopped and looked at him.

"We're here. Welcome to the home of the Highest of the High."

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