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THE SCIONS of ARRABAR TRILOGY · BOOK I

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CHAPTER ONE

10 Tarsakh, 1373 DR

Only the glow of the waxing moon shining through vine-covered trellises shielding the balcony where Emriana crouched let her see her surroundings. Even with such muted light, she could clearly make out the grounds of the estate far below her. She spotted three house guards wandering along one of the paths that meandered through the hedges and trees of the gardens. There to keep unwanted guests from gaining the grounds, they were usually easy to elude when coming from the other direction, from inside the house. The panthers were another matter. She knew that they would catch wind of her if she got too close.

The breeze carried the smell of bougainvillea and passion vine blossoms, of wandering hearts and orchids. There were so many of the blooming vines and plants—climbing

the trellises, dangling from hanging planters, and overflowing from large pots and basins—all around the balcony that their fragrances were almost overwhelming, blending together with the fainter scent of the citrus trees in the gardens below. She hoped they would help to mask her smell from the great cats.

Beyond the walls, in the streets of Arrabar, the girl could hear throngs of people celebrating Spheres. The sounds of the festival were muted from where she crouched, but they wafted in just the same. She imagined the crowds, all dressed in bright clothing and dancing in the streets, waiting for the parades. She craned her neck to hear the voices and the music drifting across the warm, damp air like the cloying scent of the large blossoms all around her. Hints of laughter and singing rose up from time to time, clearer than the general din. Perhaps that would help muffle any unintentional noises she herself made.

With a faint smile, Emriana checked to make certain the three guards had passed, then she turned and crept over to the last trellis in the row, reaching out and giving it a gentle shake to make sure it was still firmly anchored to the wall. When she was satisfied at its stability, she deftly hopped up onto the balustrade, swung out and around to the outside of the trellis, slipped her foot into one of the small openings, and began to climb.

Careful to disturb only minimally the leafy vines coiled about the trellis, Emriana rose at a steady pace, ascending all the way to the top of the frame, where it was attached to the overhang that protected the balcony below. Easing herself up, she swung one leg over the top of the portico and went flat on the gently sloped roof, catching her breath for a moment and peering back down to see if anyone in the gardens had been close by and managed to spot her. Satisfied that she had not been discovered, she spun on her stomach and shimmied to the top of the roofline.

At the high end of the inclined porch roof, the wall of the estate rose up another two stories. To either side of the space where she hunched against the wall, windows pierced the surface, broad openings that let light into a long hallway inside the building. The window frames themselves were formed of blocks of stone that protruded outward from the wall itself perhaps the width of Emriana's hand when she spread her fingers wide.

Standing with her back to the wall and keeping herself as flush against it as possible, the girl let out one deep, calming breath and lifted her left foot up, jamming it against the side of the window frame at an angle. Then she shoved upward and planted her right heel against the opposite frame, so that her legs were in an inverted V shape and her own weight kept her wedged and prevented her from slipping back down. She shoved her hands into a similar position, bracing herself firmly. Carefully, a little at a time, Emriana began to climb up, shifting her weight back and forth and inching her hands and feet higher on alternating sides.

The going was slow and nerve-wracking, for Emriana had to keep herself pressed flat against the wall to avoid tipping forward and losing her balance. She thus could not lean out to peer down and monitor her progress. It all had to be done by feel. Fortunately, she had climbed that wall a number of times and no longer felt her insides doing flip-flops at the thought of slipping and falling.

Finally, Emriana reached the limit of the lower level of windows and could stand on the top of the frame and rest her shaking legs. Catching her breath, she surveyed the grounds again, even farther below her. If she slipped then, she would fall to the inclined roof of the porch and quite possibly tumble over the side and fall the remaining story to the grassy lawn below. The girl forced that thought out

of her head and took another deep, calming breath before continuing.

The higher set of windows were more difficult to wedge into, simply because they started a few feet above the top of the lower openings. She could bend her knee and bring one foot up, but she would have to actually jump up in order to bring the second foot high enough, all the while still pressing firmly into the wall, and there was no room for half-hearted efforts. She considered it the hardest part of the climb.

Emriana began to will herself to succeed, taking several strong breaths, and, before she could think about failure, she shoved her left leg up against the frame, bent her other knee as much as she dared without overbalancing, and shoved up as hard as possible. Again, she could not look down to spot where her feet must be planted—the girl simply had to work by feel.

The sudden lift was agonizingly slow, her heart pounding in fear that she would not get high enough. As she reached the apex of her hop, she shoved her right foot out to the side, thankfully feeling the solid form of the jutting stone against her other heel. She rammed her legs apart hard to keep from slipping and just froze there, trembling.

One of these days, I'm going to have to hang a rope out here, she thought, closing her eyes in relief.

Carefully but quickly, Emriana began to work her way up again, until at last, she was near the very top of the second row of windows, fully twenty feet above the roof of the porch. She was actually glad she couldn't look down to see how far the drop was. Her hands rested on the top of the window frames, and she could go no higher and still use them for support. Slowly, still in danger of losing her balance, the girl brought her arms up to either side and over her head, keeping them pressed flush against the wall the whole time.

Overhead, Emriana could feel the top of the wall, where a parapet surrounded a platform. The platform was the highest point of the house and had been made into an observation deck, perhaps for looking out over the walls of the estate to the city beyond or just to study the stars above. The top of the wall was smooth stone, with no protrusions or crenellations to make it easier to grasp. She rested both hands there, palms to the wall and thumbs pointing out away from her body, hooking her fingers over the top and taking some of the weight off of her rapidly weakening legs.

Drawing yet another deep, slow, calming breath, the girl gathered her strength and prepared for the last effort to get over the wall. She rebraced her legs and twisted her right hand around a full turn, swiveling it in a complete circle and once again grasping the top of the stone. Then she released her other hand and crossed it over her right, allowing herself to roll out into space and make a half turn with her whole body. She lunged around and caught hold of the top of the wall with her free hand and hung there, facing the wall, her nose pressed against it. Her toes found a hold on the top of the window frame, and from there it was easy to drag herself up and over the top of the parapet and to the platform.

Emriana collapsed in a heap there, breathless. She had done it. She had managed to scale the wall. She closed her eyes and sighed in relief. From that point, getting out of the estate was a simple process.

“Sneaking out again, O sister of mine?” came a voice from the darker shadows on the far side of the platform.

Emriana nearly shrieked in fright before she realized it was Evester, her oldest brother.

“Waukeen! You scared the hells out of me!” she fussed at him, flopping her head back onto the tiles and waiting for her heart to stop thumping. “What are you doing up here?”

Evester laughed softly and stepped out from where he had been standing, hidden in the murky darkness of a great chimney.

"I could ask you the same thing, Em," he said, coming to lean over the parapet next to Emriana and peer down over the edge, where she had just ascended. "At least I used the stairs to get here. You could have broken your neck."

"But I didn't," was all the girl replied, feeling a little smug. "You and Uncle Dregaul can't seem to figure out that I'm not a little girl anymore. I can take care of myself."

"That may be," Evester replied, still leaning on his elbows as he stared out over the city beyond the walls, "but only children take such foolish chances just to prove others wrong."

Emriana pursed her lips and refused to answer her brother. She sat up finally and looked at him. Everyone in the family said Evester resembled their father, with his strong jawline and piercing black eyes, but Emriana really couldn't have said one way or another; she was too young when Obril Matrell died, barely over a year old, and she didn't remember him. The only thing she had to go on was a great portrait of her father when he was much younger, which hung over a fireplace in her grandmother's sitting room.

Emriana thought Evester looked older than the person in that painting, much older than she would have expected for his twenty-eight years. He appeared old enough to have been her father, though he certainly didn't much act like one, nor did he seem much like a brother. In truth, she saw more of Evester's twin children than she did of him lately.

"How's Uncle Dregaul?" Emriana asked finally, just to change the subject.

"Fine, I would assume," Evester answered absently, still gazing out over the lights of Arrabar. "He's in the offices still, looking over some bills of lading."

Emriana grunted, not really sure what her brother was talking about and not really caring. To her, all of the musty old parchment sheets and columns of figures Dregaul and Evester poured over every day were the worst kind of boring.

Evester didn't seem to notice her sour reaction to his answer. He merely stared out over the city, his arms folded across the parapet.

"Do you realize how much of this city is controlled by only a handful of families?" he asked.

"No," Emriana replied, thinking it was time to go. "A lot?"

"Nine-tenths of this city's wealth is tied up in half a dozen family holdings. Ninety-nine one-hundredths is controlled by perhaps fifteen Houses. It really is remarkable. And it makes it exceedingly difficult for any true business breakthroughs to occur. No one is willing to explore the possibility of joint ventures, mergers, anything bold, because that would involve risk. And when you take a risk, there are other Houses perched around the periphery, waiting to gobble up your failures."

"Are you going to tell Uncle Dregaul that I snuck out, or not?" Emriana asked at last, tired of playing the waiting game with Evester to see what his intentions were. "You know that tonight is Spheres. I really don't want to miss it."

"Er, what?" Her brother replied, apparently drawn out of much deeper thoughts. "No, Em. That's between you and him. But if you ask me my opinion—"

"I didn't."

"—I would suggest," Evester continued, ignoring the interruption, "that you think seriously about what's to be gained versus what there is to lose. It's really all about acceptable risk. A night on the town against possible danger to life and limb and a scolding from Uncle Dregaul. Every time you climb up onto the roof, every time you prowl the streets of the city

unescorted, you are risking much more than what you gain. In the business world, you'd be considered a poor investment. Too much risk."

Emriana rolled her eyes.

"Look," she said, "my birthday is in three days, Vambran is returning tonight with presents, and there's a festival in the streets. I'm not sitting here while all of the fun is out there."

"Ah, yes," Evester replied. "My prodigal brother returns from high adventure on the open seas once again. No wonder you're so eager to be on your way." He shrugged and added, "Suit yourself, but be careful. You know what kind of trouble roams the streets on a night like this."

"I won't be wandering alone," Emriana explained. "Uncle Dregaul is sending the carriage to fetch Vambran, and I just want to ride along." The girl gave an exasperated sigh and muttered, half to herself, "I don't know why he wouldn't just let me go. I'm not a child."

She rolled her eyes again, though she realized Evester probably couldn't see the expression.

"Besides," she added, "Vambran said he had a surprise for me, made it seem like he was standing right next to me, whispering in my ear. Can you imagine how he pulled that off?"

Emriana gushed, smiling as she got to her feet. She twirled once, imagining what it must be like out there, watching the Waukeenaar clergy parading through the streets as they flung the glass spheres filled with coins, cheap trinkets, and tiny gems up into the air.

"And if you're still worried, don't be," the girl said, "because I've got this. . . ."

She withdrew a slender bejeweled dagger where it had been nestled in a finely tooled scabbard, which itself was tucked into the sash at her waist. The dagger had been a present from Vambran, brought all the way from Aglarond.

“Do you even know how to use that?” Evester asked.

“Yes,” Emriana retorted, rolling the dagger deftly through her hands then flipping it through the air before smoothly resheathing it. “I got Argen and some of the other guards to teach me a few things.”

Evester snorted. “A little sleight of hand is far different from a street fight, you know. And you’d better not let Uncle Dregaul catch you hanging around the barracks. You know he won’t consider *that* very proper.”

“Duly noted,” Emriana replied sarcastically, using a phrase both Evester and Uncle Dregaul seemed fond of and employed frequently. “If there’s nothing else, then, dear brother, I’m on my way.”

“Em,” Evester said, looking pointedly at the girl then.

“Yes?” she said, pausing before hopping up onto another section of wall to begin her descent toward the perimeter of the estate and the streets of Arrabar beyond.

“Be careful.”

Emriana smiled.

“I will,” she said, and waved once before she crossed over the wall and began to tiptoe along the peaked roof of the estate.

She could feel Evester’s eyes still on her as she reached the edge and dropped down over the side. From there, it was a simple matter to cross over to the kitchen, and the barracks, by way of the roofs. The back side of the barracks was close to a zalantar tree that grew near one wall of the property. Emriana dropped down into it from the roof of the barracks, using its many fanned-out trunks to stabilize herself. Making her way across carefully, she reached the wall and scrambled onto the walkway atop it.

She swung her legs out over the smooth parapet. Settling onto her stomach, she carefully lowered herself down the other side. She sought a small,

jutting stone that she knew would be there with her toe and, when she found it, she eased her weight onto it. She then slithered down the rest of the way and dropped behind some shrubs that ran between the wall and the cobblestone street.

Emriana smiled in the darkness, pleased with herself at her successful escape and somewhat breathless with the excitement of her misbehavior. The sounds of Spheres were definitely louder, and she could tell that the crowds were just a street or two over. She quickly slipped out of her dark, snug clothing and boots and exchanged them for a colorful, tight-fitting dress and matching slippers that she had hidden in the bushes earlier in the day. Then she stood in the shadows, waiting for the carriage that her uncle had sent to fetch her brother to roll past. It wasn't long before the black, open-topped vehicle swung into view, drawn by a pair of white horses. Emriana saw Prandles, seated smartly on the driver's bench.

Perfect timing.

Emriana stepped out of her hiding place in the darkness and into view, almost skipping in delight.

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"Remember, now, I don't want to see your ugly faces for a whole day," Vambran Matrell said to the pair of soldiers standing before him on the deck of *Lady's Favor*.

He stared down at the satchel resting at his feet, and toward the gangplank, then turned back once more and caught them both smiling.

"Aye, sir," Horial Rohden said, snapping to attention and giving Vambran a sharp, if mocking, salute. "Twenty-four hours, on the nose."

The man's three-day beard and disheveled black hair contrasted noticeably with his pretensions of formality.

“A whole day, lieutenant? Are you sure you can bear to wait that long?” Adyan Mercatio drawled, a twinkle in his eye, his own grin exaggerating the white scar that ran diagonally down from the middle of his chin to the jawline on his left side.

Vambran dismissed their jibes with a quick wave of his hand.

“One day isn’t going to be nearly long enough,” he replied in jest. “Now get out of here. I’ll see you at the Crying Claw tomorrow night.”

The lieutenant motioned for the two men to depart, and the pair eagerly grabbed up their own satchel bags.

As the two men turned toward the gangplank, Horial turned back to Vambran and gave him a quick, meaningful look.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked quietly, and Adyan turned around, too, sharing the concerned look.

Vambran nodded and motioned again.

“I’m all right,” he said, trying to sound reassuring. “It’s only for a few days. Now go.”

Horial and Adyan frowned together, but they finally nodded in return and turned to go, scampering down the gangplank and disappearing into the hustle and bustle of the quay. Vambran watched his long-time friends vanish and sighed, not feeling nearly as confident as he tried to appear to the concerned pair.

Can I stomach my family for that long? he asked himself.

He wasn’t sure he knew the answer. The carriage Uncle Dregaul would have sent for him hadn’t arrived, but that wasn’t surprising, given the fact that it was the evening of Spheres. The streets would be packed with revelers, and Prandles, the carriage driver, would be having a hard time of it. Still, the lieutenant knew it was more than a lack of a ride that

had kept him standing on the deck of the ship for so long. He was simply stalling. After casting one more meaningful look around the deck of *Lady's Favor*, he finally, reluctantly, scooped up his own bag of personal effects and started down the gangplank.

Once he was standing on the pier, the lieutenant had to pause for a moment and get his balance. It still amazed him how much adjustment was necessary to go from the gentle roll of the ship to the unwavering feel of dry land, and he had been aboard *Lady's Favor* for merely four days. He could only imagine how hard it must be for a true sailor, living almost his entire life at sea, to get rid of his sea legs.

Then again, the man thought, I guess it wouldn't be any harder than when I first boarded a ship.

As he stood there, remembering how to walk without listing to one side or the other, Vambran sighed, already dreading his visit. Every homecoming to Arrabar was a bittersweet affair, the palpable strain that existed between his uncle and him intertwined with the delight of returning to familiar surroundings. As if to reinforce that point, the familiar scents of Arrabar's docks wafted past him, the smells triggering boyhood memories. Besides the sharp, tangy smell of pitch mixing with the stale odor of filthy saltwater in the harbor, the lieutenant caught a whiff of hot, spicy thae k buns from a shop nearby.

Hurrying up the pier, he turned onto the quay and moved briskly past the other ships in the harbor, deftly sidestepping the endless morass of longshoremen and sailors, merchants and harbor officials, and the endless stream of goods they loaded and unloaded, even at that time of the evening. They all worked ceaselessly under the light of huge lanterns hung from posts along the entire length of the harbor, and the light was more than ample for the lieutenant to move quickly and confidently.

Thaek buns and dockside memories aside, Vambran wasn't terribly happy to be back in Arrabar. Just thinking about coming face to face with Uncle Dregaul put his stomach in knots. The older man rarely had much to say to his nephew when Vambran returned home, and when they did speak, it was hardly warm. The lieutenant knew that Dregaul still greatly resented the trouble he had caused for the family, and he couldn't say that he blamed the man. They seemed to have come to a mutual if unspoken agreement to keep their distance from one another. Trips home to Arrabar were short-lived for a reason.

But beyond that discomfort, the lieutenant simply found life as a mercenary commander much preferable to the staid environment of a wealthy merchant House. Evester would eventually inherit the reins of the business and seemed to have a knack for it, which was all well and good, Vambran often told himself. He had no desire to be a part of bookkeeping and letters of credit.

Perhaps knowing I will never inherit it makes it easier to scoff, Vambran thought.

Just as quickly, though, the lieutenant dismissed the notion as wishful thinking. The truth was, the free and carousing lifestyle of a mercenary commander in Waukeen's own private military was satisfying. He was a prince among loyal men, he enjoyed visiting the many exotic locales throughout the Sea of Fallen Stars where his duties often sent him, and he could always find himself in the company of a lady if he so desired.

With all that life in the Sapphire Crescent had to offer, though, Vambran wasn't foolish enough to discount the benefits of being a member of a prominent mercantile family. His rank in the mercenary company, though not purchased, had been enhanced by his family connections, he knew. And even if he was one of the Crescent's best and brightest—or so his

captain had claimed—the monthly stipend he received from Uncle Dregaul was nothing to sneer at, for it was in actuality far more than his lieutenant's pay. And truthfully, he got along well with most of his relatives. He was looking forward to seeing his grandmother, and Emriana of course. Thinking of his younger sister put a smile on Vambran's face, albeit a brief one.

Uncle Dregaul—and Evester too, more and more—apparently felt the need to make Vambran miserable whenever he returned home from a tour of duty. What was so galling to the lieutenant was the way the older man so prominently displayed his antipathy, despite the fact that only a small circle of older family members knew the truth. There always seemed to be questions surrounding his choices, out-loud musings concerning what he was really doing with his life. That, even though it was common knowledge he would never hold the reins of the family business himself.

Hell, Dregaul was the one who encouraged me to join the temple, Vambran thought, though he knew good and well that, at the time, the man was simply trying to get his nephew out of his sight. Anything to avoid reminding him of what happened, Vambran mused, sighing.

Even so, Vambran knew that soldiering was not what Dregaul had had in mind, and he made a point of expressing that any chance he could. And that was really what the lieutenant's reluctance was all about. Every time Vambran returned home, his uncle and his older brother would poke and prod, hoping to hear that he was finally going to give up the soldiering, join the ranks of the true temple clergy, and rise to a position of prominence, which would in turn strengthen House Matrell's position with the Waukeenaar. He hated it, and he wanted more than anything just to avoid the whole issue.

When are you going to grow up? the lieutenant could hear his uncle asking. When are you going to

stop wasting your time and opportunities doing a common man's work?

What you really mean is, when am I going to make amends by being more useful to you, right, Uncle?

Just thinking of the impending confrontation set the lieutenant on edge. Common or not, Vambran *liked* commanding soldiers, and he wasn't planning to give it up any time soon. But though the young man might have the firmest of convictions, Dregaul had a habit of manipulating his nephew with guilt. Sooner or later, his uncle would win. He always did. Standing up to Dregaul just made Vambran's stomach roil.

Though that could be hunger, too, Vambran thought, smelling the thaek buns again. He supposed he was hoping a little wry amusement would ease his tensions, at least for a time.

Turning onto a cobblestone-paved street winding up the hill from the harbor, Vambran left the wharf behind and moved deeper into the city of Arrabar, keeping half an eye out for the Matrell carriage. The street was alive with people gathered together or moving in large clumps, many of them dressed gaily and laughing together or singing. Lengths of rope or chain had been strung between buildings or along balconies, from which dangled hundreds of lanterns and multicolored pennants and streamers that wafted in the lazy, salt-laden breeze. The celebration of Spheres was in full swing, he realized.

Vambran spotted a thaek bun cart offering the delicious meals and his mouth began to water. He shifted his satchel to his other shoulder and pulled his coin pouch free of the hidden pocket where he kept it inside his *naraebul*. He fumbled a pair of coppers out, slipped the pouch back underneath the short cloak, and strolled up to the cart. The proprietor passed him a large bun and took his coin with a smile, and Vambran was on his way, biting into the snack gingerly. His first mouthful rewarded him

with spicy meat, mushrooms, and onions soaked in a tomato-and-peppers sauce. He closed his eyes in contentment, savoring the taste.

It's always the food I miss the most, the lieutenant mused, taking another bite.

At the next corner, Vambran was forced to stop, for the crowds there had gotten a lot thicker, and he could see why. One of the many parades common to Spheres was passing by, led by a mitered Halanthi bedecked in his overly gaudy vestments. Even from that distance, Vambran could see the numerous gems and thread-of-gold sparkling all over the Waukeenar priest's scarlet cloak, as well as the robes themselves. The lieutenant thought he recognized the Halanthi, though he wasn't certain. Not that seeing an unfamiliar face bedecked in Waukeenar vestments would have surprised him. The temple swelled with new priests almost every day, drawn to its resurgence since Waukeen had returned to Brightwater. In the two years since the Merchant's Friend had reappeared, the temple's ranks had nearly doubled.

The priest waved and smiled at everyone as he strolled past, followed by a horde of musicians playing a lively dancing tune. They in turn were followed by a large oxen-drawn wagon, also brightly decorated, upon which sat a handful of Telchar and Coins, the most novice of priests in the temple. As they rumbled by, those young men and women alternated between smiling and waving at the crowds and tossing fist-sized spheres of glass up into the air that were filled with cheap pretties—small imperfect gems, a few coppers or silver coins, and perhaps a necklace of beads or two. The spheres shattered whenever they struck anything, though they had been magically altered so that the fragments of glass became as soft as parchment afterward. The crowds who'd gathered along the parade route laughed and ran, trying to scoop up the treasures where they landed, or even

attempting to catch the delicate orbs as they fell from the night sky.

A drunk man, amber foam flecking his thick beard, staggered past Vambran, his eyes twinkling in merriment, one cupped hand holding a combination of sphere fragments and coppers, the other a beaten tin belt cup half full of frothy beer. He wore three or four colored necklaces around his neck, and as he neared a woman standing next to the lieutenant, the man paused, smiled broadly, and attempted to pull one of the strands free, presumably to give to her. Unfortunately, he went for the necklace with the belt cup still in his hand and wound up tipping beer out onto the cobblestones. He stopped and stared forlornly down at the widening puddle as the lady laughed, then leaned in and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before trotting off, disappearing into the crowds. The drunk man watched her vanish, then turned and gave Vambran a wink and a smile before staggering on his way.

Vambran laughed, deciding that, for the moment at least, he was happy to be home. He hadn't remembered it was Spheres until they were only a day out of Arrabar, but it was a good if unintentional welcome-back celebration, he decided, and he was glad for it. He turned to see if he could find a way through the crowds since the parade had passed and thought he heard someone calling his name. He stopped and peered around, uncertain if he'd imagined it.

"Vambran!" the call came again, and that time, the lieutenant heard it clearly.

He turned in the direction of the sound and was nearly knocked to the ground as a woman in a brightly colored dress launched herself at him and wrapped him in a bear hug. He nearly dropped the remaining chunk of thaek bun to the street in surprise. It took him another heartbeat to recognize

the shoulder-length tresses of windblown black hair, slightly damp from the sultry air.

“Em!” Vambran cried, returning the hug and laughing. “I didn’t recognize you!” he said, pulling back at last to get a better look at his sister. “By Waukeen, but you must have grown a foot since I last saw you.”

Emriana rolled her dark eyes at him.

“It’s only been two months,” she chided, but her beaming face told Vambran that his comment delighted her.

In truth, the girl only came up to Vambran’s chin, but she still seemed to have matured considerably. He raised an eyebrow at her rather snug dress.

“Been teasing Denrick again?” he asked, gesturing at her figure, which he realized was no longer that of a little girl’s.

His sister was rapidly becoming a woman, and a startlingly pretty one, at that.

Emriana smirked, rolling her eyes again.

“Please,” she said with more than a hint of disdain. “Don’t ruin the evening by mentioning *him*.” The girl cocked her head to one side, staring Vambran squarely in the face. “Three?” she asked, obviously puzzled.

The lieutenant started to shake his head quizzically, then he realized she was referring to the three painted dots upon his forehead.

“Ah, yes,” he said, nodding and smiling. “That’s my new surprise. I’ve been working with one of the other Crescents, and I’ve managed to learn a few simple tricks.”

Emriana’s eyes widened, first in surprise, then in delight.

“Really? You have to show me! That’s wonderfu—” The girl froze as something occurred to her. “Wait,” she said, turning her head sideways, looking at her brother askance. “Is that how you sent me your message?” she asked, growing excited again. “That was wonderful! You must teach me.”

Vambran shook his head and held his hands up, trying to calm his sister down a bit.

"No, no," he said, laughing at her exuberance. "That was something else entirely. I'm not *that* good with the magic, yet."

Emriana glared at her brother.

"You know what Uncle Dregaul will say, once he sees that on you," she scolded. "Sometimes I think he's convinced that every wizard in town is secretly preparing to bring back the magic plague."

Vambran started to tell his sister that he had no intention of letting his uncle see the third mark and risk his wrath unnecessarily, but he never got the chance. Emriana lunged at Vambran again, hugging him tightly once more.

"Oh, it's good to see you home," she said, her voice muffled in his shoulder. "When I got your strange message that you'd be home tonight, I knew I had to come down and meet you. Sorry I'm late. I'm glad I didn't miss you."

Vambran pulled free of her embrace and stepped back.

"Only you?" he asked, his mouth beginning to curve in a barely concealed smirk. "Sneaking out again?" he added, his tone teasing.

"No, not just me. Prandles has the carriage on the other side of the road," she said, pointing toward the black vehicle with its attendant horses. "But Uncle Dregaul wasn't going to let me come. I'm going to turn sixteen in three days, and he still treats me like I'm five."

"So how did you change his mind?"

Emriana smiled and said, "I didn't." At her brother's bemused smile and mildly shaking head, the girl pretended to grow indignant. "Stop it! I missed you!" She gestured toward the remains of the thaek bun in her brother's hand, and at the celebration going on around them. "And I knew it would take you forever

to get home with all this going on, and I couldn't stand waiting."

"So you snuck out." Vambran said, still smirking. "Again."

"Yes," Emriana replied, stamping her foot in frustration. "Why does everyone keep bringing that up?"

Vambran laughed.

"Well, it's no skin off my nose, but don't be hiding behind me if you get caught," he said, pretending to sound stern. "I may command an entire company of professional soldiers, but Uncle Dregaul is still the man to answer to in House Matrell." He chuckled and added, "At least this way, if you sneak back in, you have to pretend you haven't seen me yet and I get a whole new set of hugs."

In response to his teasing, Emriana stuck her tongue out at him playfully. Then she took his free hand and they turned toward the carriage together. As the pair of them approached, Prandles hopped down, bowing repeatedly at Vambran.

"Evening, Master Vambran," the driver said, his voice somewhat rough and gravelly and his accent common. "Good to have you home again. Do you have other things for me to fetch?"

Vambran shook his head and replied, "We can send a wagon to get them off the ship tomorrow, Prandles. Let's just go home."

"Very good, sir," the driver said.

He climbed up onto the bench once Vambran and Emriana were seated and the door was properly shut.

Soon, the carriage was on its way, making reasonable progress through the crowds, which were thinning somewhat because the parade was long past.

"So," the girl said as they rolled out of the port district, climbing the gentle hills upon which Arrabar had grown. "What did you bring me from Sembia?"

They were moving into the trade district by then, where the buildings were spaced more widely apart and loomed behind formidable walls. Imposing estates of white stone with highlights of burgundy, deep green, azure, or any of a dozen other rich colors sprouted numerous golden-spired domes and towers. Those were the palatial homes of the city's wealthiest merchant-nobles, and among them rested the Matrell estate.

Vambran snorted and said, "What makes you think I brought you anything?"

Emriana laughed and playfully punched her brother in the arm.

"Because it's almost my birthday, Meazel-face!"

Vambran feigned shock and dismay.

"It is?" he teased. "Oh, that's right . . . Em's birthday."

He tapped his chin, pretending to contemplate that news.

Emriana glared at her brother again and said, "And I know you're smarter than to show yourself around here without bringing me a birthday present."

Vambran mimed horror at the suggestion, then grinned again.

"You're not sixteen yet. You'll just have to wait until your party to see what it is."

Emriana growled in exasperation, but her delight wouldn't allow her to hold the scowl.

"Grandmother Hetta is planning something amazing, so I hear from Jaleene," she gushed. "But no one will tell me anything," she continued, pouting again. "It's supposed to be a complete surprise."

"As well it should. It's not every day you turn sixteen, you know."

The carriage continued on, passing the houses of the truly great merchant families. On the left was the ever-private House Darowdryn, whose occupants all sported hair so fair as to be almost white. Several blocks down and on the right was the sprawling

Cauldyl estate, home of the most sneering and pretentious family Vambran had ever had the displeasure to meet. Up the next rise, the spires of House Mestel rose up, peeking over a whole grove of suth trees strategically planted around the entire perimeter of the grounds, just behind the outer wall, for privacy.

Vambran grimaced slightly, thinking of the Mestels, and how his grandfather had been born a bastard to one lordling of that family. Even after Obiron Matrell had changed his name and made a fortune with his own merchant company, the Mestels still looked down their noses at what they considered cousins born on the wrong side of the district. Vambran doubted it would ever be any different. House Matrell was a fine merchant empire, but it was small compared to the half-dozen or so truly ancient ones, in existence almost since the founding of the city.

The lieutenant shook his head, ridding his mind of such unpleasant thoughts.

Instead, he turned to his sister and said, "So, Em, tell me what's been going on in the great halls of our beloved homestead. How's Mother?"

Emriana shrugged and replied, "She's fine. Spends all day with Grandma, or staring out the window day-dreaming, as usual."

"Hmm," Vambran grunted. "How about Evester? How are the twins?"

"Evester is turning into Uncle Dregaul more and more every day," Emriana replied with a sour tone. "The two of them go off to the offices and hunch over their books all day. He hardly has time for his own children, much less me. But the twins are fine, though I can't keep Quindy out of my rooms, lately. She wants to try on my clothes all the time. And Obiron is just a wild thing. He actually went running through the garden the other day with a loaded crossbow, screaming at the top of his lungs. I thought he was hunting one of the panthers or something."

Vambran swallowed hard at that image and shuddered. Emriana seemed not to notice. Recovering, the lieutenant forced a chuckle.

“Now you see why I joined the Crescents. Too much niece and nephew is never a good thing.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve been lobbying Grandma to build me a private wing. After the crossbow incident the other day, I think she was almost convinced.”

Vambran laughed out loud at that. He could only imagine how Grandmother Hetta, the matriarch of the family, would have reacted. He found himself honestly smiling again, thinking fondly of seeing her. He doubted she would have retired for the evening—the woman kept long hours, even at eighty-one years of age. Uncle Dregaul might have managed the day-to-day operations of the family business, but Hetta Debrinne Matrell was still the head of the household.

It’s good to be home, Vambran decided.

He turned to his sister to tell her so, but the words never came out. A loud, desperate scream issued from an alleyway between two blocks of shops, cutting him off.