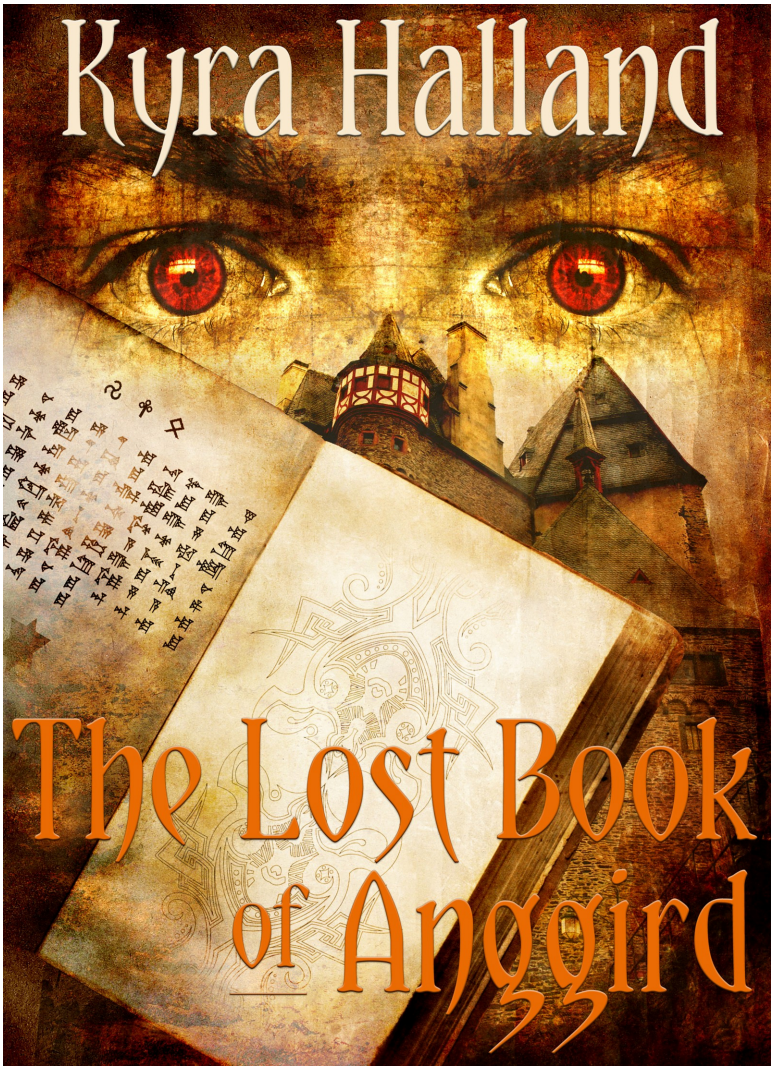


Kyra Halland



The Lost Book of Anggird

## **The Lost Book of Anggird**

by Kyra Halland

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Stodgy Professor Roric Rossony has been asked to find a way to stop the deterioration of the magica, the Vorunne Dominion's powerful magical force. With the help of his free-spirited assistant, Perarre Tabrano, he begins the most important work of his life – and finds his orderly existence turned upside down by his unexpected romance with Perarre.

Driven by the need to find the truth about the magica, Roric goes too far in his research, delving into lost and forbidden books that have been hidden away for centuries. Then the most dangerous book of all falls into his hands, and magical disaster strikes.

Forced to flee from the Dominion authorities, Roric and Perarre embark on a journey to discover the secret of the magica's origins and restore magic to its ancient form, a journey that only their growing magical powers and their love for each other will help them survive.

## The Lost Book of Anggird

SAMPLE

## Prologue

### **EIGHT HUNDRED YEARS.**

His rule had lasted for eight centuries, countless generations. Never could he have imagined such success, especially after such a difficult beginning. The others would have laughed at him if he had told them his plans, and now he had far exceeded even those audacious hopes.

Unlike many in previous ages and other lands, he had learned the true secret to holding on to power. Stay invisible, stay in the background, draw no attention to yourself, do nothing to give those over whom you rule cause to resent your power and want to take it from you. Following this principle had allowed him to claim the prize that so many others had sought and lost: absolute, unchallenged supremacy.

No matter how careful he was, though, all would be lost if his secret was ever discovered. He had done his best to erase all trace of who he had once been and what he had done to gain his position, but after all these years he no longer remembered if he had been thorough enough, if the right books had been destroyed and if the accounts he had given of himself were consistent with each other.

Still, after eight hundred years, how much of the truth could be left? Books decayed, questions were forgotten, and fact evolved into half-remembered legend and was replaced by the truth as taught by trusted authorities — who had, of course, been taught by him.

Most importantly, because his rule was so benign and because he drew no attention to himself, no one had any reason to question what was taught or to turn against the

order he had established. He would remain safe, undiscovered, in power, alive.

Life, in short, was good.

## Chapter 1

**P**ERARRE STOOD OUTSIDE the door to Professor Roric Rossony's apartment, nervously straightening the sleeves of her black . When she told the other Assistants she was being offered the chance to work as a translator for the eminent Professor Rossony, they had been divided between envy and pity. Roric Rossony was the most respected scholar of Balance Theory in the Vorunne Dominion, and working for him would be the opportunity of a lifetime. A good reference from Professor Rossony would open any door that could be opened to a woman, and maybe even some that would normally remain firmly closed.

On the other hand, the Professor was as famous for his picky, prudish, and generally difficult disposition as he was for his scholarship. Everyone respected him, but no one seemed to actually like him. Since Perarre had never taken any of his courses or seminars, had never done more than glimpse him from a distance, she had no way to judge for herself whether working for him was more cause for envy or for pity.

Well, she would find out soon enough. She took a deep breath and knocked.

"Enter," a low voice responded.

She opened the door and walked into the apartment. “Professor Rossony? I’m Perarre Tabrano. I’ve been sent to apply for the position of translator.”

The Professor was sitting at a big cherrywood desk in the back corner of the apartment’s large main room. The desk was angled to face the door as well as the rest of the room. Perarre paused, struck by the Professor’s appearance. His black hair and fair skin were an unusual combination in the Vorunne Dominion, and there was something faintly exotic about his dark eyes, strong nose, and broad sweep of cheekbones. Broad-shouldered and apparently in fit condition, no longer youthful but still untouched by middle age, he was a perfect example of a man in his prime. The overall effect was quite striking. At least the view would be nice as she worked, Perarre thought.

“I don’t recall telling the Assignment Office that a female would be acceptable for this position,” the Professor said.

So much for the pleasant view. Perarre stalked over to the desk and dropped her dossier onto it. “If you’ll review my qualifications, Professor, you’ll see that I have earned Superior rankings in Ancient, Middle, and Modern Languages and that I am also a Superior-ranked Reader.”

“I have no doubt that your qualifications are adequate, Miss Tabrano,” the Professor said, glancing at the paper. “But the research I plan to pursue will require long hours of working together, very likely well into the night. I have doubts as to whether the feminine disposition is equal to such demands, and in any case such extensive fraternization between Professors and female Assistants is highly inappropriate and disruptive.”

What a prig. No wonder he had such a bad reputation. “Professor Rossony, do you or do you not want an

Assistant qualified in Early and High Middle Lazivanic languages and Reading? Because if you do, I'm the best there is. If you don't, then I won't waste any more of your time or mine."

He picked up the paper she had dropped on his desk, frowned at it for a moment, and set it down with a sigh. "Very well, Miss Tabrano. I will consider you for the position, provided you understand two things. First, I expect you to keep our work in strictest confidence. Is that clear?"

A trace of an accent that she couldn't identify teased Perarre's ear, but there were more important things to think about right now. She set the puzzle aside for later. "Of course, Professor. If you'll inquire of the other Professors I've worked for, they will tell you that I've always strictly observed confidentiality." Not that Professor Rossony's work was likely to make interesting gossip, anyway. While his work in Balance Theory was considered brilliant, essential to the continued improvement of the practice of magic, and even, on occasion, controversial, it was also likely to be extremely dry.

"Very good," he said. "Now, as to the other matter. I expect of myself and of anyone who might work under my supervision that the utmost care be taken with every detail of dress, grooming, and deportment. Carelessness in one area of one's life is inevitably reflected in all other areas. Therefore, Miss Tabrano, when you come in tomorrow morning, I will expect to see your hair neatly arranged, your collar bleached, starched, and mended, and your fingernails filed. Do I make myself clear?"

Perarre thought of her knot of thick auburn hair that never wanted to stay in its pins, her frayed and dingy white collar, and her ragged fingernails, which she had a habit of



chewing when she was concentrating. In contrast, the Professor's high white collar looked starched enough to withstand the Dominion Executioner's axe, his face was shaved to smooth perfection despite the late hour of the day, and every hair on his head lay neatly in place with no apparent use of oils or balms. There wasn't a speck of lint or a misplaced crease anywhere on his black cravat and suitcoat, and his fingernails looked like perfect polished seashells.

Perarre reminded herself that with a good reference from Professor Roric Rossony on her dossier, she could have her choice of any position she wanted and would never have to take any work she didn't want. Taking extra care with her hair, her collars, and her fingernails was a small price to pay to secure her future. "Yes, Professor."

"Very good. The position is yours, then, pending my satisfaction with your first assignment and the results of my inquiries to your previous employers. Since this task is not of a confidential nature, you may work on it in your room tonight." He handed Perarre a small book bound in crumbling black leather and several sheets of closely-written manuscript. "This book has been translated but not indexed. Its organization is so chaotic that without an index it is impossible to find what one is looking for. Several Professors, including myself, have been waiting turns to use this book. When I told the others of my intent to engage a full-time translator, it was agreed that if my translator would index the book, I would have the first turn to use it. I will expect to see your work tomorrow morning, immediately after Lecture." He picked up a stack of papers and began thumbing through them.

Perarre smiled to herself. She was the best, whether he was willing to admit it or not. And she could index

blindfolded with her writing hand tied behind her back. The job was hers. “Yes, Professor.” She waited for the Professor to say something else, or at least dismiss her, but he seemed to have forgotten she was there. After a moment she asked, prompting him, “Is there anything else, Professor Rossony?”

Without looking up from his papers, he said, “This is not the army, Miss Tabrano. You need not wait for a formal dismissal.”

No “good afternoon” or “I will see you in the morning” or “Thank you for your interest in the position.” Perarre bristled with irritation at being brushed off like that. “I’m most grateful for the opportunity to work for you, Professor Rossony,” she said, “even though I’ve been told that the famous Professor Rossony is a sanctimonious prig with a broomstick permanently stuck up his —”

“That will do for today, Miss Tabrano. You may be excused. I will see you at Lecture in the morning.”

“Good day, Professor.” Perarre curtsied, gave him her brightest smile while barely stifling a laugh, and left the room.

\* \* \*

RORIC STARED AT the door after it closed behind Miss Tabrano, wondering if he had just made a terrible mistake. Never mind who had been saying uncomplimentary things about him; he had no illusions that he was popular. He was more concerned about his new assistant.

According to her dossier, she was a native of one of the farming provinces north of Vorunne City, and her olive-toned skin, untidy hair, and generous curves — not that he was normally one to notice that sort of thing — made her

look more like a farm girl than the kind of scholar who would possess the impressive — extremely impressive — credentials detailed on the paper on his desk. Firsts in both Ancient Languages and Middle Languages five years in a row; three Superior rankings, the highest ranking possible, from the College of Scholarship; a Superior ranking in Reading from the College of Magecraft. Very few people earned Superior rankings from both colleges of the University of Vorunne City, the Vorunne Dominion's oldest, largest, and most prestigious institution of learning. Not even Roric had achieved this.

Still, he wasn't sure about her. Besides the drawback of her sex, the state of her appearance suggested a carelessness that he could not tolerate. However, qualifications like hers couldn't be dismissed out of hand. He would see whether or not she heeded his warning to pay attention to the details of her dress and grooming, and would make the standard inquiries into her background and character. And tomorrow morning he would have a sample of her work, to see what she could do under severe time constraints and high expectations.

Despite his misgivings, he found himself hoping that she wouldn't give him a reason to turn her down for the position. It was sheer good luck that someone with her qualifications was available when he found himself in need of an assistant for the first time in his twelve-year career. The truth, much as he hated to admit it, was that he wouldn't be doing her a favor by giving her the job; she would be doing him a favor by accepting it.

\* \* \*

PERARRE RETURNED TO her room to find two letters in the letterbox on her door. One was from her sister Samale, the other was from her former roommate Laydra, who had a position as an assistant to an assistant under-secretary in the Internal Affairs Service. Laydra's letter had been sent from one of the little northeastern protectorates that were constantly fighting each other over boundaries and trying to claim independence from the Dominion. Perarre hoped to get a similar position with the Foreign Affairs Service when her three-year Assistantship was over, so she was always interested in what Laydra had to say about her work. She put Laydra's letter aside to enjoy later and, after setting Professor Rossony's book and its translation on her desk, opened the letter from Samale.

Their mother was well, Samale wrote, and still successfully running the Golden Hare Inn. Samale was pregnant with her eighth baby. Perarre smiled as she read that; if any woman was meant to have a lot of children, it was capable, good-natured Samale. Her sister also reported that Edro was still waiting for Perarre to come home and marry him. Well, Perarre thought, he could just wait. It was thanks to Edro that she had no intention of ever marrying or going home again.

Perarre finished reading the letter and tucked it away in the ribbon-bound bundle with the rest of Samale's letters, then pulled the rope of the service bell. While she waited for an orderly to arrive, she undressed and put on the emerald silk dressing gown that Laydra had sent her last year, when she was posted on the southern peninsula. Perarre dumped her four black dresses into a heap on the floor, added her collars and underclothes to the pile, then counted her coins.

The orderly who appeared at the door was a round-faced blonde girl named Nida, a regular on Perarre's floor. "I want bath water and a cold supper," Perarre said, "and my dresses all cleaned and pressed. Extra whitening and starch on the collars, please, for tomorrow I begin working for the esteemed Professor Rossony." Perarre dropped her coins into the girl's hand. "Is that enough?"

Nida counted the money and smiled. Perarre had intended the amount to include a tip. "Yes, Miss Perarre. I've heard from the laundry-girls that Professor Rossony has his own special treatment for his collars. I'll tell them to do the same for yours. And I'll tell them to mend the frayed ones."

"Oh, good. Thank you, Nida."

"My sweetheart's an orderly in the Professors' Hall. He says Professor Rossony will drive you over the edge, but he's really a decent sort at heart. He's a good tipper, anyway."

"I suppose anything is possible," Perarre said. "Now, I need my clothes back first thing in the morning, so please hurry."

"Yes, Miss." Still smiling, Nida scooped up the pile of clothing and left.

After her bath and supper, Perarre sat down at her desk, still wearing her dressing gown. A glance at the translation the Professor had given her told her that it was so poor it would be no use at all. She would have to make her own translation while she indexed. Fortunately, the book itself was brief, and since this was the original copy, she could read the author's intent as well as translating his words, which would make the work go more quickly. Still, it was going to be a long night.

## The Lost Book of Anggird

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AT PRECISELY FIVE-THIRTY in the afternoon, Roric set aside the lecture he was revising for inclusion in a new book and went for supper at the Professors' Club. There, he sat alone at his usual table and ate roast beef, potato soufflé, and green beans, accompanied by a single glass of wine. Then he returned to his apartment, where he resumed the task he had been working on earlier. At nine-thirty, following his usual habit, he poured himself a finger's-width of brandy, and sipped it slowly while he looked over the day's work, making a correction here and there. He always strove to do his work as perfectly as possible the first time, but a few errors inevitably crept in despite his best efforts.

When the clock on the wall chimed ten, he set the brandy glass on the sideboard for the maid to wash when she came in the next morning and locked his door. With a touch to a metal plate on the wall, he turned off the magical flameless lamps, devices of his own invention, much safer than candles or oil lamps, which lit the apartment's main room.

In his bedroom, he tended to his evening ablutions, then changed into a freshly laundered and crisply pressed nightshirt. He made sure the chime on his bedside clock was set to ring at six in the morning, got into bed, and turned off the flameless lamp which sat on the bedside table.

As happened most nights, disturbing half-dreams teased at his mind whenever he started to fall asleep. He tried counting backwards from one hundred, his usual method for willing himself to sleep, but it didn't work. Finally, he got up, put his trousers and shirt back on, and left the bedroom. He sat in his reading chair, touched the flameless

lamp on the table next to the chair to turn it on, and picked up the book he kept for these nights when he couldn't sleep.

The book had its usual effect; he soon began to doze off. But then another half-dream, completely different from any he had ever had before, popped into his mind. He saw and heard, as vividly as if she stood before him again, the smile and half-laugh with which Miss Tabrano had left him that afternoon.

He started awake. As soon as he assured himself that there was no one else in the room, he picked up his book and started reading again. Enough things disturbed his sleep already; he had no intention of letting his new assistant become one of them.

He read another half a page, then the lines of print began to blur together and he finally fell asleep.

## Chapter 2

**P**ROFESSOR ROSSONY HAD described the book he had given Perarre to index as “chaotic,” but Perarre soon detected a method to the madness. By Reading the faint psychic traces left behind by the author, a Balance scholar writing five hundred years earlier, she was able to pick out key words and ideas and see their importance and relationship to each other as the author saw them.

Engrossed in the process of Reading and translating and correlating and writing, Perarre didn't notice the hours as they passed. Finally, as the sky outside her window lightened, she added the last alternate spellings to the index and double-checked the last sets of page references with

both the original book and her translation. She laid down her pen, straightened the manuscript pages into a neat stack, and stretched. A few hours' sleep, and she'd present Professor Rossony with some work that would —

Morning Lecture! The memory almost made her tip her chair over backwards. Professor Rossony not only wanted the index immediately after Lecture, he had said he expected to see her at Lecture. Score one for the Professor, she thought; it served her right for her little jab at him.

According to the clock on her desk, she had half an hour before Lecture started. She pulled the bell-rope for an orderly. A moment later, a middle-aged woman appeared at the door with Perarre's laundry. "They gave the collars Professor Rossony's own special treatment, Miss Perarre," she said with a smile and a wink, and Perarre tipped her one of her few remaining coins.

Perarre dressed as quickly as she could in the formal attire required at the University. Plain white drawers — should she have had them starched also? Professor Rossony probably did. Then a chemise and stockings, her last pair that wasn't coming unraveled — she had to remember to buy new ones — and garters to tie around the stockings to hold them up. The stockings were followed by her ankle-high black shoes, each with a dozen impossibly tight buttons that needed doing up. Once her shoes were successfully buttoned, she put on a full-skirted white petticoat, then tackled her corset. She hooked up the front of the corset, then, with a deftness born of having had to do this herself countless times, tightened the laces up the back and tied them.

Her curves thus successfully contained, she put on a full black poplin skirt and a high-necked, long-sleeved black poplin bodice with dozens of tiny black buttons up the front



and on the cuffs. She attached one of the cursed collars to the neck of the bodice, then wound her thick hair into a knot at the back of her head and fastened it with two dozen bent-wire hairpins. It took another two dozen pins to trap every last lock that kept trying to slip free. There wasn't time to file her fingernails, but after the night's work there wasn't enough of them left to file anyway. Hopefully Professor Rossony would be so blinded by her white collar that he wouldn't notice anything else.

With everything neat and perfectly in place, Perarre tucked the old translation and her translation and index into a leather folio, picked up the old book, and hurried downstairs and out of the Assistants' Hall.

College Square was crowded with black-robed Professors, Masters of Magecraft in their brightly-striped robes, and students from both Colleges making their way to Lecture. Daily attendance at Lecture was required of all Mages — one of the few areas in which the law was stricter for Mages than for mundanes — because their lives and the lives of those around them depended on their having a thorough understanding of the nature and correct use of *magica*, and because of the great debt they owed to the Benefactor, who had sacrificed his life to release his power into the world in the form of the *magica*, and to his chosen servants, Svyin, Toradys, and Anggird.

As a practicing Mage, a Reader, Perarre was supposed to attend Lecture every day, but from the time she had first come to the University, after a childhood of attending Lecture once a week at the most, she had balked at the requirement. Besides, she considered herself a Scholar rather than a Mage, and while Scholars, and all other non-mages, were expected to go to Lecture as often as possible, they weren't required to attend every day. Only the strictest

Scholars bothered with daily attendance at Lecture. It figured that Professor Rossony would be one of these.

Besides having extensive legal privileges, Mages were also generally exempt from societal standards of propriety. Masters and students in colorful robes clung to each other in pairs as though they had just arisen from bed, or gathered in laughing, boisterous groups as they hurried towards the Lectorium, somehow on time despite their infamous all-night revels.

Inside the cavernous Lectorium, Perarre spotted Professor Rossony sitting on a bench with a small group of much older Professors. She stopped next to that bench, as though looking for a place to sit, so he would see that she was there. Professor Rossony's gaze paused briefly on her, then he turned to whisper something to the Professor on his left. Her purpose accomplished, Perarre slipped away and found a seat well away from Professor Rossony and his group, where she braced herself for the coming ordeal.

\* \* \*

AN HOUR LATER, it was finally over. Out of sheer boredom, Perarre had been stealing glances at Professor Rossony all during Lecture. She was interested to note that he didn't join in on the recitations; he sat with his eyes closed, appearing to still be deep in thought on the meditation topic. When Lecture ended, she waited a few minutes after the Professor left the hall, so it wouldn't look like she was tagging after him too eagerly, then she walked to the Professors' Hall, went up to the third floor, and knocked on the door of his apartment.

"Enter," he said.

Perarre opened the door and went in. The Professor was sitting at a small round dining table in the living area of the apartment, drinking from a white porcelain teacup. “Good morning, Professor Rossony,” she said.

He set his cup down. “Good morning, Miss Tabrano. I appreciate your promptness. I was also pleased to see you at Lecture. I understand that you have not been in the habit of attending. I trust that will change now.” He stood and walked over to the desk, taking his teacup and a plate with a buttered roll with him.

Perarre decided to ignore the subject of Lecture attendance for now. Instead, she brought the book and her folio over to his desk. Since yesterday, a long, narrow table had been placed adjoining his desk at a right angle. She assumed this would be her work table. “Here’s the index you asked for, Professor Rossony. And a better translation.”

He took them from her. “You may have some tea and a roll, if you like,” he said, then he picked up the index and started looking through it.

Perarre wandered over to the small dining area. Half of the apartment served as the Professor’s study, and was furnished with the huge cherrywood desk, the work table, and a round seminar table surrounded by eight or ten chairs. The front part of the other half of the apartment served as a sitting and dining area, and the back part was walled off to form the bedroom. The apartment’s furnishings were of dark wood and simple but elegant design. Bookcases and framed landscapes lined the walls of both sides of the large main room. It was all very neat and tasteful, and revealed nothing about the man who lived and worked there except that he was likewise neat and tasteful.

After her quick look around, Perarre took a white porcelain teacup and plate from the cabinet over the sideboard, helped herself to tea and a sweet pastry from the breakfast laid out on the dining table, and returned to the work table. While she ate, she watched as the Professor leafed through the index and her new translation, following her lists of page references. On occasion he would raise an eyebrow and nod slightly or murmur, "Of course." Perarre bit back a smile. The great Professor Rossony was, in spite of himself, impressed.

When he finished looking over Perarre's work, the Professor carefully tapped the bottom edges of the manuscript pages against the desk to straighten them, then set them down in front of him.

"I hope my work is adequate, Professor Rossony," Perarre said, trying to sound modest.

"I would say that it is indeed, at the very least, adequate, Miss Tabrano."

"Good. You see, I was forced to work in my dressing gown, as I had sent all my dresses out to be cleaned. I was concerned that such slovenliness might have affected the quality of my work."

The Professor blinked, but didn't take the bait. "As I said, your index is quite satisfactory. And I'm sure the new translation will be useful. Now, Miss Tabrano, you may begin working on this." He handed several double-width pages fastened together with a metal clip across the desk to her. "In addition to translating this, please make an index of all appearances of these terms relating to the various techniques of envisioning." He added a list of words written in elegant, precise handwriting to the stack of pages.

"Does this mean I have the job, Professor?" Perarre asked.

He looked at her as though he had forgotten that her employment was still only probationary. "Of course," he said. "Assuming that my inquiries reveal nothing to cause me to change my mind, I have decided to engage you for the position."

"Thank you, Professor." Perarre picked up the manuscript he had given her and glanced through the pages. They were in High Middle Lazivan, a forerunner of modern Vorunic, easy enough to translate. She gave them a quick Reading, and found nothing but a scribe's neutral aura, colored with a slight trace of eagerness for supper. This was a copy, then, instead of the author's original document. Still, this task shouldn't be difficult, even without magical insight into the author's thoughts. Paper, pens, ink, and a stack of dictionaries had been placed on the table, ready for her to use. She took a sheet of blank paper, dipped a pen in ink, numbered the first page, and began writing the title of the book at the top.

"Miss Tabrano."

Perarre looked up at the Professor. "Yes, sir?"

"When I suggested yesterday that you attend to your grooming, I did not intend that you should make yourself into a hedgehog. You may remove as many hairpins as may be causing you undue discomfort."

"Thank you, Professor." Perarre pulled out a dozen of the more irritating hairpins. Right away, a lock of hair on each side of her face slid free of the knot. The Professor frowned but didn't say anything. Perarre hid another smile. She had made her point.

\* \* \*

RORIC HADN'T BEEN expecting an index as comprehensive as the one Miss Tabrano handed him, let alone a whole new translation. The index wasn't just a listing of words and page numbers; it was a work of scholarship in its own right. As he went through it, following the references, the sense and structure of Inderborg's book and the development of its ideas became clear to him. Of course, Miss Tabrano had had the advantage of being able to Read the long-dead scholar's thoughts and intentions as he wrote the book, but the detailed impressions that could be picked up by a skilled Reader didn't fully account for the precision and thoroughness of her work. And the new translation, while not a particularly elegant piece of writing, was much more readable than the old one.

He looked at Miss Tabrano where she sat, absorbed in her work, her thick auburn hair threatening to rebel further against the two or three dozen hairpins that still held it in its knot at the back of her head. Her fingertips looked red and sore, the nails chewed down to the quick. Perhaps due to the lack of fingernails, she was now chewing on her pen. Which wasn't just any plain old-fashioned quill; he had provided her with the newest carved rosewood pens with precision metal nibs. And now one of the fine new pens would have teeth marks on it.

Her remark about wearing a dressing gown while she worked had been a clear and deliberate challenge to him, and he was forced to admit that they would have to agree to disagree on the matter of how one's dress and grooming affected one's work.

But the chewing... He looked at her index again, and saw where she had made a connection between two concepts which had eluded him through all his years of studying Inderborg.

Well. If all of her work was of the same quality as this index, he supposed he could get used to her chewing on things. The irritation her habits caused him would be a small price to pay for such skilled assistance with the difficult and vital research he was planning to undertake.

And he wondered why he was wondering what color the dressing gown was.

### Chapter 3

THE NEXT MORNING, Perarre saw no reason to sit through Lecture again — after all, she had gone just the day before — so she set out for Professor Rossony's apartment just as Lecture was ending. Her collar was starched and spotless, her hair was done up without a stray lock anywhere, and she was ready and eager to get to work. The manuscript Professor Rossony had given her the day before was much more interesting than she had expected it to be, and she fully intended to impress him with the thoroughness of her index of references to the terms on his list.

As she walked across College Square in the wake of the crowds leaving the Lectorium, she wondered what kind of Foreign Service position she could get with an excellent reference from Professor Rossony. Maybe she would be sent to the Old Kingdoms, the history-rich archipelago off the northeastern coast of the Dominion, or even the exotic Jade Lands far to the southeast. It was said that both the Old Kingdoms and the Jade Lands had their own forms of magic, though, according to the Lectors' teachings, magic in other parts of the world, if it existed at all, was primitive

and crude compared to the Dominion's magica. Perarre wanted to see for herself if there was indeed magic in other places, and what it was really like.

It was also said that the men of the Jade Lands were exceptional lovers. She wouldn't mind having the chance to discover the truth of that for herself, too.

Of course, though her translation skills would be valuable on a foreign posting, her Reading ability would be useless away from the magica that was bound to the lands of the Vorunne Dominion. But there would be plenty of time when she was old to sit at a desk somewhere in the Dominion, Reading documents to verify their truth and authenticity. For now, she wanted to travel as far as she could, and see as many new and interesting things as she could, and live her life her own way.

She arrived at Professor Rossony's apartment and knocked on the door. With his usual terseness, the Professor invited her to enter. She bustled into his study. "Good morning, Professor Rossony," she said.

"Why weren't you at Lecture this morning?" the Professor asked without looking up from the paper he was writing.

Perarre's good mood collapsed, and she sat down at the work table. "I haven't attended Lecture regularly in four years, since I finished at the College of Magecraft. You didn't tell me that going to Lecture was a condition of my employment." She turned to the page she was translating.

Professor Rossony set down his pen and folded his hands on top of his desk. "We are all dependent on the magica and its Balance, Miss Tabrano, whether or not we are practicing Mages. It is something that cannot be taken for granted. Daily attendance at Lecture serves to keep the correct use of the magica at the forefront of one's mind. As



one who is considered an authority on Balance, I feel that it is my responsibility, and the responsibility of anyone who works under my direction, to set the proper example. In addition, Miss Tabrano, as you are not only a Scholar but also a practicing Mage, you are required by law to attend Lecture every day. As well, you would do well to pay heed to what can be learned by daily attendance at Lecture.”

“But all I can do magically is Read. That isn’t changing anything, or putting something there that wasn’t there before, or taking something away. It’s just... seeing what’s there already.”

“But you still draw upon the magica, don’t you, Miss Tabrano?”

“Yes, but just a little.”

“However, regardless of the quantity of magica you have used, it has now been touched by your intentions in using it. Correct?”

“I know, I know,” Perarre said. “They drill it into us, in the Reading classes, to never use Reading out of mere curiosity or to violate someone’s trust or privacy or for other dishonest, harmful, or self-serving purposes. Besides being wrong in and of themselves, such actions can leave a damaging taint on the magica.” She could still remember the oft-repeated warnings almost word for word.

“Precisely. But if you didn’t understand why it’s wrong and what the consequences could be, it would be too easy to give in to the temptation to use your ability for selfish reasons, just once.”

“Believe me, I know that very well. I wouldn’t have my Superior ranking if I had trouble remembering it. I don’t need to go to Lecture every day to be reminded. Besides, I do pray to the Benefactor almost every day, so I’m thinking about the magica then.”

He gave her a curious, slightly disapproving look, as though she were some sort of strange-looking insect he'd never seen before that had landed on his buttered roll. "I'd heard that was the custom in some of the more backward areas of the Dominion, where remnants of the old folk religions still linger."

"Excuse me? Backward?"

"We're told that the Benefactor gave up his life force, which became the *magica*. In short, he's deceased. He can't hear prayers."

"He heard me when I was thirteen years old and had to get out of my village fast. I prayed, and two weeks later the Examiners came, found out that I could Read, and brought me here."

"Coincidence. Magical abilities usually manifest themselves at the same time as adolescent fears and anxieties. It's the job of the Examiners to look for young people such as you were."

"They hadn't been to our village in four years. And then they showed up right when I needed them."

"Again, coincidence. If they hadn't been there in four years, the village leaders were probably expecting them at any time, and you somehow picked up on that expectation without consciously realizing it."

"But —" Perarre started to say, then stopped herself. It wasn't worth arguing about. She knew what had happened; she didn't need him to believe it for it to be true.

"In any case," the Professor went on, "whether or not you pray, and to what, is none of my concern. My concern is that you learn as much as you can about the *magica* and the Balance, demonstrate proper respect for them, and set the example that my Assistant would be expected to set."

It wouldn't kill her to do what he wanted, she told herself. Sooner or later he would realize that her work stood on its own merits without any of this other nonsense, like the starched collar and the hairpins. Going to Lecture every day for now was a small price to pay for the reference she wanted from him. "All right, Professor," she said, trying to sound like she really meant it. "If you think it's important, I'll start going to Lecture every day."

"Very good. I'm glad we understand each other."

\* \* \*

PERARRE MADE SURE to arrive at Lecture early the next morning so that the Professor would see her on his way in. She had tucked some letter paper and a pencil into her black net reticule, thinking she could pass the long, dull hour by writing a letter to her sister or to Laydra. She paused just inside the great double doors of the Lectorium, looking for a seat in the back row. Then a hand gently but firmly closed on her elbow, startling her.

"I'm glad to see you here so promptly, Miss Tabrano," Professor Rossony said. "Come, I would like to introduce you to some of my colleagues."

Perarre sighed. So much for catching up on her correspondence and not being bored out of her mind for the next hour. It was almost as if he knew she was planning to spend the time doing something besides paying attention. "I would be honored," she made herself say as he steered her towards the bench where he had sat the other day.

The three elderly Professors were there again today. "Professor Starke of the Department of Natural History," Professor Rossony said, indicating each man in turn, "Professor Fenin, who teaches composition and rhetoric —

” Perarre nodded at him; she had taken two courses taught by him “— and Professor Baldrin, my own mentor in Balance Theory. Gentlemen, this is my new assistant, Miss Tabrano.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” Perarre said as the three Professors greeted her politely.

Professor Rossony stood aside so that Perarre could take her seat first. “Thank you, Professor, but I’d rather sit on the end,” she said. “I get nervous when I’m hemmed in.” Which was true; besides, if an opportunity came up for her to slip away, she didn’t want to have to climb over the Professor’s legs.

The Lecture began, and before long Perarre was wondering if there was any way she could take her writing paper and pencil out of her reticule without the Professor noticing. She untied the drawstrings without incident, but when she began to pull the black net pouch open, her elbow bumped Professor Rossony’s arm, and he gave her a disapproving glance. With a sigh, she resigned herself to passing the time by mentally composing her letters and secretly watching the Professor.

As he had before, Professor Rossony sat silently through the recitations, his eyes closed as though he was deep in thought. Was he really pondering the teachings from the Lecture? Perarre wondered. Or had he just fallen asleep? She studied him surreptitiously, trying to guess.

Something caught her eye, and several more quick glances confirmed what she had seen: three pinprick scars in a row on his right earlobe, as though his ear had once been pierced three times. Perarre tried to imagine Professor Rossony wearing earrings, and failed completely. He might as well have emerged from his mother’s womb wearing an immaculate black suit and starched white collar. It was yet

another mystery, along with his accent, for her to puzzle over.

When Lecture finally ended, Perarre stood up, eager to get out of there, and stepped into the aisle just as a group of Magecraft students rushed past. One of them bumped into her and made her stumble backwards into Professor Rossony. Before she could catch herself, she stepped hard on his foot.

He gasped and nearly doubled over. He sat down hard and rested his head on the back of the bench in front of them, shaking, his breathing fast and shallow.

"I'm so sorry, Professor!" Perarre said, horrified. "Did I break your foot?"

He didn't answer her. He seemed to be struggling to bring his breathing under control. Professor Baldrin, who was standing on the Professor's other side, touched his shoulder. "Will you be all right, Rossony?" he asked. There was concern in his voice, but no alarm, almost as though he had seen this before.

Professor Rossony nodded. After a few minutes his breathing steadied and he stopped shaking. He straightened up, took an immaculate white handkerchief from his coat pocket, and dabbed at his face and, furtively, his eyes. When he was done, he tucked the handkerchief neatly away and stood, straightening his suitcoat. "My apologies, Miss Tabrano," he said. "I have always had an unusual sensitivity to pain. Please don't concern yourself about what happened."

Perarre's chagrin at her clumsiness was joined by an unexpected feeling of pity for him. What would it be like to live with that every day? And with the embarrassment it no doubt caused him? That would explain his fastidiousness, at least in part. To avoid mishaps like the one she had just

caused, he would have to carefully control his actions and environment as much as possible. How many people who disliked and mocked him had any idea about this? “I’m really, really sorry. I had no idea. I’ll be more careful —”

“Please,” he said more insistently. “Think no more of it. Shall we go now?”

Perarre, Professor Rossony, and the three older Professors left the Lectorium. Professors Fenin and Starke went their separate ways to teach their morning classes. Professor Baldrin, a widower who had moved from his University-owned townhouse back into the Professors’ Hall, accompanied Professor Rossony and Perarre back to the Hall, where they left him at the door to his rooms on the ground floor.

When they reached the Professor’s third-floor apartment, he asked, “Would you care for some breakfast, Miss Tabrano?”

A white porcelain teapot, a plate of golden pastries, and a bowl of fresh fruit were laid out on the small round dining table. It all looked and smelled delicious. All Perarre had had to eat earlier was some burnt toast and undercooked bacon, typical fare for the Assistants’ residence hall. Since Assistants left the University when their two- or three-year Assistantships ended, except for the few who accepted positions as Instructors or Professors, less expense and effort was put into their accommodations than into those for students and faculty. Perarre longed for the day when she would leave behind the cramped Assistants’ quarters, with their bad food and uncomfortable beds. “Yes, Professor. Thank you.” She joined him at the dining table.

The Professor took a second place setting from the cabinet over the sideboard and brought a second chair over to the table for himself, then poured hot tea for her and for

himself. The housekeeper must have been there just moments earlier for the tea to still be so hot. Perarre took a sticky fruit pastry, still warm from the oven, and broke off a piece and popped it into her mouth.

“Now, Miss Tabrano,” the Professor said, “can you tell me Aeldric’s five aspects of Balancing with gratitude?”

Perarre stopped in mid-chew. The Professor, she noted, was eating his pastry with his knife and fork, not his fingers. Self-consciously, she wiped her fingers on her white linen napkin and swallowed her bite of pastry while she tried to think. She seemed to recall Aeldric’s name being mentioned during the lecture, but she hadn’t been paying enough attention to remember what else had been said. Still, this was basic; every student in the College of Magecraft learned about Aeldric’s Five Aspects their first term. “Um...”

“Come now, Miss Tabrano. You should know this, and if you have forgotten, you need to refresh your memory.” He recited the five aspects to her, seemingly without even thinking about them, as he cut an apple into thin slices and wiped his fingers on his own napkin, which appeared as immaculate after he used it as it had before. “What did the Lector say about these five aspects today?” he asked.

It was no use. “I’m afraid I don’t know, sir. I was thinking about a letter I’m planning to write to my sister.”

The Professor ate an apple slice with his knife and fork. “I know you are not trained as a Balance theorist, Miss Tabrano, but if you are to assist me in the very difficult research I will be undertaking, you will need to have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the essentials of Balance theory. I can teach you the things you will need to know, if you will attend the daily Lecture and be prepared to discuss it afterwards. Otherwise, your admittedly

admirable skills as a translator and Reader will be of limited use to me. Do I make myself clear?”

Perarre silently reminded herself of adventures in foreign lands and exceptional Jadean lovers. “Yes, sir.”

“Very good. Allow me, then, to tell you what was said this morning.” The Professor related what the Lector had said about Balancing with gratitude, explaining why he agreed or disagreed with the Lector’s points. Was this what he did during Lecture, Perarre wondered, critique the teaching? And what was that accent he had? It bothered her that she still hadn’t been able to identify it. Together with his unusual looks and the piercing scars on his ears, she couldn’t imagine where in the Dominion he was from. Perhaps his family had come from somewhere outside the Dominion, though immigration to the Vorunne Dominion was rare and tightly restricted.

“And what is your conclusion, Miss Tabrano?”

“Um. I think...” What did she think? At some point, she had lost the thread of what he was saying. “I think that what you say makes more sense. Feeling sufficiently grateful for the Benefactor’s gift can’t make up for an incorrect Balancing spell.”

He gave her a piercing look over the rim of his teacup, then set the cup down. “You don’t have to agree with me merely because I’m your employer, Miss Tabrano.”

“I’m not, really,” she said quickly. “I think you’re right. If the magica is a physical phenomenon that has its own natural laws, your feelings about it don’t matter if you break those laws.”

He gave her an approving look. “Very good. I think that if you will pay attention during Lecture every day, you will benefit greatly from our discussions and gain the expertise I will require of you.”



They finished eating, and he fastidiously dabbed at his mouth once more with his napkin, then rose from his chair. “You may begin your work for the day, Miss Tabrano. I have a seminar group coming in in half an hour, so I’ll review your progress after that.”

“Yes, sir.” She followed him to the desk and got to work, though her thoughts were jumbled after what had been a rather odd morning.

## Chapter 4

AS THE DAYS went by, Lecture was no more enjoyable than it had ever been, but breakfast in Professor Rossony’s apartment afterwards made up for the ordeal. The Professor had instructed the housekeeping staff to set the table for his assistant as well as for himself, so the food was plentiful. As Perarre and the Professor dined on fruit, rolls, pastries, eggs, bacon, and tea, they discussed the day’s Lecture. These discussions were far more interesting than Perarre had expected. The Professor’s knowledge of his field was deep and comprehensive, taking in not only Balance theory but also the related areas of mathematics, natural history and philosophy, and magical philosophy. While his explanations tended to be pedantic, they were also crystal-clear, and Perarre was surprised at how much she was learning from him.

These leisurely breakfast discussions were a pleasant beginning to the long, arduous workdays the Professor demanded of her. Often, he kept her working through the mid-day and evening meals. On those days, he would order

a meal brought in to his apartment. Sometimes he shared those meals with her; other times she ate by herself while he dined at the Professors' Club. Most days, she didn't have time to go to the Assistants' Hall for meals, anyway; the Professor expected her to complete translation projects in half the time she normally would have taken. He even required her to come in on the University's one day off each week, when no classes were held and most of the faculty, staff, and students were enjoying a day of leisure.

None of the other Professors she had worked for had ever kept her working at such a pace, or made so many specialized requests, such as looking for references to specific items in the books she translated. Perarre assumed that, like the post-Lecture breakfast discussions, this was in preparation for the mysterious and important research project he had mentioned — a project which had yet to materialize. She was beginning to wonder if it ever would.

\* \* \*

PERARRE PUT THE final touches on her fifth translation for the Professor and waited for his seminar students to leave at the end of the class hour. The Professor taught three seminar classes, which each met once per week. Two of the classes were made up of advanced students from the College of Magecraft; the other consisted of a small group of upper-level students of Balance Theory from the College of Scholarship. In the seminars Perarre had taken, the students had often lingered after class to continue the discussion and ask questions of the Professor or Master. Sometimes they had even arranged informal evening sessions of the class at a tavern or coffeehouse. But the students in Professor Rossony's seminars always bolted as

soon as the hour was over; none of them seemed to want to spend any more time with him than was absolutely necessary. Not that she could blame them, considering his dry teaching and distant, brusque manner.

After his students fled, Professor Rossony returned to his desk. Perarre gave him the stack of sheets with her latest translation, then the Professor handed her a brown, worn-looking book. "As you translate this one, Miss Tabrano, please take particular note of why Gudniv believes that Encoding with words is more important than Envisioning in Balancing a spell. Please include all possible alternate translations of any passages touching on that matter, and also notes on any Readings you are able to take."

Perarre took the book from him. "Yes, Professor." She flexed her right hand, which had been cramped and aching for several days now, and blinked to re-focus her eyes. "Professor Rossony, would you mind if I went outside for a few minutes before I start? My hand has a cramp, and I could use some fresh air."

He took his pocket watch out of his waistcoat pocket and glanced at it. "Not at all. I've found that a moderate amount of wholesome exercise is quite beneficial to both the mind and the body. I think I can spare you for thirty minutes."

"Thank you." Eager for a few minutes of freedom, Perarre hurried from the Professors' Hall and walked across College Square, enjoying the cool air of the early spring afternoon. She stopped at a small dining hall, more of a tea shop, in one of the courtyards off the Square, for some tea and a sandwich. When the time allotted for her break was up, the cobwebs had cleared from her mind and the cramp in her hand was easing up.

When she arrived back at the Professor's apartment, he asked, "Miss Tabrano, are the demands of this position too strenuous for you?"

"No, not at all, Professor," she answered hastily.

"I must tell you that your workload will only increase once I commence my planned research. As I recall saying at our initial interview, I have serious doubts as to whether the female constitution is suited to such demands. If you cannot meet my requirements, you will only be a hindrance to me."

"I can do it, Professor. I just needed some fresh air."

He folded his hands on top of his desk. "Allow me to make a suggestion, Miss Tabrano. Every morning I take half an hour of exercise in the swimming bay at the University's private marina. The ladies' bathing hour begins shortly after the end of Lecture; I would strongly recommend that you make a habit of engaging in such exercise yourself."

Perarre looked at the Professor, completely unable to picture him swimming. Surely he didn't swim in his black suit, but she didn't know if he even owned anything else. "Isn't the water still awfully cold this time of year?"

"Not in the least. I find it invigorating. If you hope to be able to keep up with the work I shall be requiring of you, it is imperative that you improve your health. I insist that you give it a try."

Glowing references. Exotic postings. Jadean lovers. Never having to take a job she didn't want. All were at stake along with her position, she realized. "All right, Professor. I'll try it." Sooner or later, he would decide that it took too much time away from their post-Lecture discussions and delayed the start of her workday too long, and he would change his mind. She hoped.

“Very good. I’m certain that you will quickly see the benefit to both your health and your work.” With that, he retreated to his bedroom to wash up and shave again before going to deliver his afternoon lecture. This, Perarre had discovered, was the secret to his polished appearance at an hour of the day when normal people were starting to look a bit frayed at the edges. She grimaced as she picked up the book he had given her earlier. Feminine constitution, indeed. Overbearing prig. She’d show him she could do anything he asked of her, and do it twice over.

\* \* \*

PERARRE DUTIFULLY SHOWED up for the ladies’ bathing hour every day for the next three days. There was a stand at the swimming bay that provided modest black swimming dresses, along with the appropriate underclothes and a private booth for changing. The private booth seemed unnecessary, since she was the only person there besides the clothing attendant. She hadn’t swum since before she left home when she was thirteen, and she hadn’t missed it. But the Professor had told her to give it a try, and so she did, gamely wading and paddling her way through the frigid water three mornings in a row. Then, on the third day, she came down with a cold.

At first, the cold was only an itch in her throat. As she worked that day, the Professor continually offered her glasses of water, which she accepted gratefully. By the next morning, she was a feverish, achy, drippy-nosed mess. Going to Lecture was out of the question. Perarre thought about staying in bed that day, but missing a day of work might convince the Professor that she really was unable to keep up with his demands. She dressed, not quite managing

to arrange her collar and hair as neatly as she usually did, and made her way to his apartment.

The Professor barely glanced up at her when she came in. “You weren’t at Lecture, Miss Tabrano. And, it seems, you have decided to forego your daily swim.”

She couldn’t admit that she wasn’t feeling well. “I’m sorry, Professor. I overslept.”

“I see. Please don’t let it happen again.”

Perarre nodded and dropped into her chair at the work table. What had she been expecting, that he would see how sick she was, feel sorry for her, and give her the day off? She shuffled her book and papers and pens around, not quite able to focus her foggy, feverish mind on her work. When she opened the book and tried to read its archaic script, her eyes watered and ached. She dropped her head to the table and covered it with her arms to block out the light.

“Miss Tabrano!” The Professor sounded genuinely alarmed. Perarre heard him come around from behind his desk, then she felt a light touch on her face. “You have a fever! Why didn’t you tell me you were ill?”

“Can I have the day off so I can die in peace, sir?” she mumbled. “And please don’t fire me.”

To her astonishment, instead of firing her, he started gently massaging her temples. Gradually, the pain in her head ebbed away, along with the feverish feeling. The comfort spread to her watery eyes, stuffed-up nose, and burning throat. The Professor’s hands moved to her shoulders, still keeping the same light, slow, rhythmic touch. Then the touch faltered and he stopped. “I apologize for not realizing sooner that you were in distress, and for being unable to provide more relief,” he said. His voice had gone quiet and slightly husky.

Perarre raised her head and looked at him. “You can Heal.”

“I only achieved an Adequate ranking in Healing. I have some... difficulty with the Balance.” His face was covered with a light sheen of sweat, like it had been the day she stepped on his foot.

Of course. Healing was Balanced by pain for the Healer; the Healer had to filter the discomfort and distress taken from the patient out of the magica he had used before allowing the magica to return to its place. Even the small amount of pain that would be brought on by giving mild relief to cold symptoms was probably almost unbearable for the Professor. “Will you be all right, Professor?”

He nodded. “It usually passes before very long. I think I’ll go lie down for a bit. You are excused from work until you are well again. Only, Miss Tabrano —”

“Yes, sir?”

“You do not have my permission to die.”

“Yes, sir.” She watched him to make sure he made it to his bedroom, then left, planning to order up something hot and strong to drink and then crawl into bed for a week.

\* \* \*

RORIC STOOD BENDING over the basin on his washstand, leaning against the wall for support. He wiped his mouth with a corner of his soiled cravat, then reached for the nearby pitcher, which the maids continued to dutifully fill every day even after the installation of the modern water system in the commode room. He poured a glass of water, rinsed his mouth, and spat into the basin. It had been a near thing, he hadn’t been able to make it to the commode room,

but at least he had managed not to be sick in front of Miss Tabrano. It was bad enough that she saw the rest of it.

He unknotted the ruined cravat and unfastened his collar, which had also sustained considerable damage. He couldn't bring himself to subject the laundry staff to the disgusting consequences of his weakness, so he set the items aside to put into the rubbish.

He slid down along the wall to sit on the floor next to the washstand, fists clenched in frustration, tears in his eyes. The pain was bad enough, but he hated the sickness, the shame, the feeling of helplessness that came along with it. He felt like he was trapped in that dark hour twenty years ago, shortly after coming to the University, when he had crouched in a hidden corner with the point of a stolen kitchen knife pressed against his throat, trying to will himself to plunge it in, to put an end to the memories and pain and shame and to make sure that no one would ever discover what he was. The life he had painstakingly built for himself since that day, the respect and reputation he had gained, all seemed to crumble away under the onslaught of misery that Healing brought upon him. Why had he done this to himself, just for the sake of temporarily relieving a simple head cold?

Because her illness was his fault, that was why, a reproachful voice inside his head pointed out. It was disgraceful the way he had been overworking her. Had she really thought that he would dismiss her if she became ill? If he wasn't careful, he would drive her away or wear her down completely before he even had a chance to begin the most important research he would ever do.

And, in any case, what right did he have to interfere in his employee's personal habits? What had he been thinking, to insist that she go swimming in the frigid waters of early



spring? He had been born in a place where icy winds blew unhindered for three-fourths of the year. Though he couldn't bear pain, tolerance of the cold was bred into every particle and sinew of his body. It had been stupid of him to assume that Miss Tabrano would have the same tolerance.

He sat in misery, waiting for the pain to ebb away. As it faded, a memory of smooth, warm skin beneath his fingertips came unbidden into his mind, along with the realization that, regardless of pain, illness, and propriety, he had enjoyed having an excuse to touch her. More shame flooded through him — how could he have taken such advantage of Miss Tabrano in her illness? But he couldn't bring himself to regret that brief moment of unexpected, unfamiliar pleasure.

And that was more alarming than any amount of pain.

## Chapter 5

AFTER PERARRE'S FIRST two days of being confined to her room with her cold, boredom set in. She didn't have any books that she hadn't already read at least twice. She tried writing to Laydra and Samale, but, to her horror, her letters were full of the Professor — the things she was learning from him, the breakfasts they ate together, the mysteries of his accent and ear-piercing scars, his unexpected vulnerability to pain and talent for Healing. Up until now, she had only complained and joked about him before moving on to other topics. Her brain must really be addled

by the cold, she decided. She crumpled up the letters and threw them into the small heating stove in her room.

The day after that, Nida appeared at her door with a package wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. “Compliments of Professor Roric Rossony, Miss.”

Perarre dabbed at her chafed nose with a handkerchief and took the package. What could the Professor possibly be sending her? It felt like a book. Maybe it was a translation assignment, or something about Balance theory he wanted her to study. She didn’t care, as long as it gave her something to do.

She untied the strings and folded back the wrapping paper, then gasped in surprise. Before her lay not an old, crumbling tome for her to translate but a collection of the myths of the Jade Lands, expensively bound in embossed and gilded leather. There must have been some mistake; why would the Professor send her a book like this?

Curious, she opened it. The inner flyleaf was inscribed, *From the library of Professor Roric Rossony, University of Vorunne City.* Beneath the inscription, the Professor had written in his elegant handwriting, *To Miss Tabrano, With my best regards and wishes for a rapid recovery, Prof. R. Rossony.*

Perarre carefully thumbed through the book, noting that some of the gilding on the page edges had worn off, and that several pages were creased from being turned. This wasn’t just a spare book he had never looked at, but a much-read favorite. Judging by the handwritten inscription he had added to it, he didn’t expect her to give it back. *Well, Professor*, she thought, *this is unexpected.* Feeling a little more cheerful — if nothing else, she could probably assume that this meant she wasn’t fired — she settled back into bed and began reading.

\* \* \*

WHEN PERARRE RETURNED to work after being out for a week, the Professor greeted her with a slight lift at the corner of his mouth that might almost have been a smile. "Good morning, Miss Tabrano. I hope you are feeling quite recovered from your cold."

"I'm feeling much better, Professor, thank you. And you?"

"I'm quite well, thank you."

"Thank you for helping me that day," she said. "And for the book." She wanted to ask if he had recovered completely from his own sickness, but was reluctant to embarrass him by bringing it up. She decided she would leave it up to him to mention if he wanted to.

"You're quite welcome," he said, glancing through the papers on his desk.

Perarre took her seat at the work table and began looking through the translation she had been working on, trying to figure out where she had left off. She was wearing her hair in a braid; she was still too fatigued from her illness to wrestle with pinning it up. She wondered if the Professor would say something to her about it.

"It's good to have you back," he said after a moment. "I had become accustomed to working with you present, and found it difficult to adjust to working alone again." He shuffled his papers a little longer, then set them down. "I am not a bad person, Miss Tabrano," he said, still without looking at her.

"Of course you're not," she said, surprised that he would say such a thing.

“I know I’m not popular, or even well-liked, but...” He trailed off awkwardly.

Cold, impersonal, unpleasant Professor Rossony had missed her, and cared about what she thought of him? Perarre suspected that trying to figure it out would give her a headache. “I’m glad to be back, Professor.”

“Perhaps when you are well enough, Miss Tabrano, you might consider taking a brief daily walk in order to strengthen yourself. If you believe it would be beneficial, of course,” he added hastily.

Perarre smiled to herself at the concession he was making. “I suppose I can manage that,” she said.

\* \* \*

PERARRE’S HEALTH RECOVERED, and she and the Professor settled back into their old routine. She began setting her alarm clock to go off fifteen minutes earlier so that she could take a quick walk around College Square before Lecture every morning. Of course the Professor noticed — she timed her walks so that he would see her on his way to Lecture — and he made his approval clear. Exciting postings with the Foreign Service seemed ever closer within her grasp. Assuming that this fabled research project of his ever materialized.

Several days after Perarre’s return to work, as Professor Rossony was gathering up his notes at the end of a seminar class, two of his students hung back while the others were leaving. “Professor?” one of them, a husky, red-haired young man, said when the others were gone. “Could we ask you a question?”

Professor Rossony looked around, as though the student was speaking to some other Professor. “He means you, Professor Rossony,” Perarre said, trying to suppress a grin.

The Professor gave her a quelling look. “Thank you, Miss Tabrano.” He turned to the students. “Mr. —”

“Arcosu, sir,” the red-haired student said.

“And I’m Therin,” added the other student, a slender young man with curly black hair.

“Mr. Arcosu. Mr. Therin. Of course, you’re welcome to ask questions at any time.” The Professor sounded almost stunned. “What can I help you with?”

The three of them sat back down at the round seminar table and were soon deeply engrossed in a discussion that lasted nearly half an hour. When the students rose to leave, Professor Rossony said, “Gentlemen, if I may ask a question in turn?”

“All right, Professor,” Arcosu said. Intrigued, Perarre set her pen down while she listened.

“This is the first time that any of my seminar students have expressed a need to ask questions and have various points clarified after the class session,” the Professor said. “I want you to be very honest with me: has the quality of my instruction declined so that I am no longer adequately conveying the information I am attempting to teach?”

“No, no. Not at all, Professor,” both students answered quickly.

“You’re the best teacher here,” Arcosu said. “But we’ve always had questions, and... well, you told us to be honest. The truth is, it always seemed like we weren’t allowed to ask questions. Almost like you didn’t want us to bother you.”

“So we would meet in the library or somewhere to try to figure things out ourselves,” Therin added.

“Ah,” the Professor said. “I see.” After a moment he went on. “I do apologize, sincerely. I never meant to give the impression that questions were unwelcome or that I preferred not to be bothered. What happened to change this, if I may ask?”

“I don’t know,” Arcosu said. “It’s just the last few weeks, you haven’t seemed so...”

“Like you wanted to be left alone,” Therin finished for him.

Despite their claims of ignorance, both young men glanced in Perarre’s direction. Suddenly feeling conspicuous, Perarre picked up her pen and started writing again.

Professor Rossony seemed not to have noticed the glances. “Please let the other members of the class know that any of you are always welcome to stay after class and discuss the material with me further, or to make an appointment to come in at another time to speak with me,” he said.

“Yes, sir. Thank you.” The two students gathered up their papers and left.

When the Professor returned to his desk, he asked, “Has there been a noticeable change in my manner recently, Miss Tabrano?”

“They certainly seem to think so, sir.”

He tapped his pen on the desk, thoughtfully. “Why do you suppose that is?”

How in the world could she answer that question? Did the students really think that she might be the reason for the change? “I’m afraid I really can’t say, sir.”

\* \* \*

ANOTHER WEEK PASSED with still no sign of the mythical but supposedly very important research project. Perarre was starting to wonder if the Professor had made it up just to have an excuse to hire a lovely and charming assistant. But, no, he hadn't wanted to hire a woman. Would he have preferred a lovely and charming male assistant? The thought made her mind boggle, and she dismissed it. She couldn't imagine him being interested in anything besides his work. So what was delaying his research, if it was so important?

One morning, as soon as Lecture ended, the Professor squeezed past Perarre with uncharacteristic haste and lack of dignity and hurried to catch up with the Lord Regent of the University, who was just leaving the hall. Curious, Perarre hurried after him.

"Sir Baril!" Professor Rossony called out as he caught up with the Lord Regent just outside the doors of the Lectorium.

The white-haired, aristocratic-looking Regent stepped aside so that they wouldn't block the doorway. "Your application is still under consideration, Rossony," he said with an air of impatience, as though they had had this conversation too many times already. "You do understand that this is a decision which cannot be reached in haste."

"Of course, Sir Baril. But —"

"Be assured, Professor Rossony, we will inform you of our decision the moment we make it. Good day." He walked away, stopping briefly now and then to greet other Professors and Masters.

In silence, Perarre and Professor Rossony crossed College Square to the Professors' Hall. "What was that all about?" Perarre asked when they reached the Professor's apartment.

“I would prefer not to speak of it just now, Miss Tabrano,” he answered curtly. He sat down to the breakfast that had been set on the dining table.

Stung by the rebuff, instead of joining him Perarre went to the work table and picked up the translation she was working on. She kept her back turned to him and made it obvious that she was far too busy to care whether he answered her question or not.

A long silence passed. “Would you care for some breakfast, Miss Tabrano?” he finally asked.

“I’m not hungry.”

After another silence, he cleared his throat. “Miss Tabrano. I beg your pardon if I’ve offended you. I should not have taken my temper out on you. The truth is, I consider myself fortunate that you were available when I needed to engage a translator.”

Surprised, Perarre turned and looked across the room at him. He was concentrating intently on the roll he was buttering. “Thank you, Professor.”

He seemed to lose interest in the roll and began peeling an orange instead. “I have been asked by a group of my colleagues in the College of Magecraft to carry out some vital and rather pressing research on the historical development of Balancing techniques. For a month now, I have been awaiting a decision from the Council of Regents that will determine whether or not I can go forward with this research. I’m afraid the wait has started to test my patience. Thus, my unforgivably rude response to your question.”

The sincerity of his apology left Perarre floundering for words. “I understand. I think I am hungry, after all.”

She joined him at the table. Before she could reach for the platters of fruit and rolls, he took a roll, tore it open, and



buttered it for her. As he handed her the roll, his fingertips brushed hers, and he let go of the roll so quickly she nearly dropped it. He busied himself with pouring a cup of tea for her, and added just the right amounts of cream and sugar. As though he had been making note, every morning, of how she liked her tea, Perarre thought. He held out the cup to her as though offering a gift, or an apology, or both, and she took it, accepting them.

## Chapter 6

AS THE NEXT several days passed, the Professor grew more distant and distracted. Whenever Perarre spoke to him, he responded with an absent “Mm-hmm,” or sometimes not at all. Their breakfast discussions were reduced to nervous fidgeting on his part as he tore apart a roll or cut up a piece of fruit and then left it, uneaten, to go to his desk to look over his mail and messages yet again, as though a new one might have appeared there in the five minutes since he last checked.

When Perarre finished her latest translation, he took a book from the neat stacks on the credenza behind his desk and handed it to her. It looked familiar. “Professor Rossony?” she said, paging through it, “I’ve already done this one, sir.”

“Ah.” He glanced at the front of the book she was showing him. “Well, then, make an index or something.” He went back to the lecture he was sporadically working on, while Perarre silently willed the Regents to hurry up and make up their minds. The tension and agitation flowing in

waves from the Professor were close to driving her over the edge.

Early the next evening, just after Professor Rossony ordered their supper from an orderly, another orderly came to the door with a note. “It’s from the Council of Regents,” the Professor said after closing the door again. He tore open the folded and sealed note. Perarre waited as he silently read the message, her forgotten pen depositing a large ink blot on her paper.

“The Regents wish to see me immediately.” The Professor’s hands actually seemed to shake as he made some imperceptible adjustments to his cravat and brushed invisible lint from his black suitcoat. “I don’t know how long this will take. You needn’t wait for my return.” He hurried out the door.

Perarre wasn’t about to leave. She wanted to find out from him the moment he got back what the Regents’ decision had been. She went back to her translating — she had finally managed to snag the Professor’s attention long enough to get a book from him that she hadn’t already translated — and worked until the meal he had ordered arrived.

By the time she finished eating, Professor Rossony still hadn’t returned. Perarre tried to get back to work but couldn’t settle down to it. It seemed like he had been gone for a long time. Had the Regents denied his request, whatever it was, and he was out drinking away his disappointment? Or was he celebrating their approval? Neither possibility seemed likely. Perarre knew that the Professor liked a single glass of wine with his dinner and a single finger-width of brandy later in the evening. She had never seen him drink a drop more than that. She could no more imagine him drunk than wearing earrings.

The Regents had to approve whatever it was he wanted. They couldn't turn him down. They wouldn't dare. He was the greatest Balance Theory scholar in generations, if not in the entire history of the Vorunne Dominion. If they turned him down, he could leave and find a position at another one of the colleges in the Dominion. There were none as old, large, rich, or prestigious as the University of Vorunne City, but he could take his considerable share of the University's prestige with him to another college, along with all the best Balance scholars and the best students of magic.

Unable to concentrate, Perarre got up and walked around the apartment. To pass the time, she made a survey of the books in the highly polished, glass-doored bookcases that lined the walls. There were expensive editions of novels, poetry, plays, mythology, and epics, along with books on history, science, mathematics, philosophy, and natural history. Of course, he had every book on Balance theory written in the last two hundred years, since the invention of mechanical printing, as well as modern editions of older books. Four of the five most recent books on Balance theory were by him; the fifth was by Professor Baldrin. A dozen or so landscapes, tastefully framed watercolors and engravings by some of the most admired artists of the past forty years, hung on the walls. A glass-covered cherrywood case held a fine collection of seashells.

A large upholstered chair stood near the fireplace at the far end of the apartment, beyond the dining area. A small table next to the chair held a reading lamp and a copy of *The Grace of Civilization*, the dry and endless philosophical poem about the rise of the Vorunne Dominion. A braided black silk bookmark was placed about halfway through the book. She wondered if Professor Rossony was really reading the book — as far as she knew,

no one had ever actually read it all the way through, notwithstanding the many courses, lectures, and commentaries devoted to it — or if it was just for show.

It all spoke of a man of education and refinement, but nothing else. There were no drawings or paintings of family or home, no books suggesting any idiosyncracies of taste, no unusual keepsakes. Even the luxury didn't mean anything in particular; Professors were under the sponsorship of the Magisterial Council, and were provided with the best of everything.

Perhaps his bedroom told a different story. After going to the door and walking away a few times, Perarre couldn't fight her curiosity any longer. She opened the door a little. There was a slight *click*, not so much a sound as a barely perceptible adjustment in the Balance, just on the edge of Perarre's awareness, and a lamp in the room came on. Perarre knew that the Professor had invented a flameless magical lamp that could be turned on and off with a touch by someone with the ability to use *magica*, and the main room of the apartment was outfitted with several such lamps, but this mechanism — certainly also of his invention — seemed especially ingenious and convenient. She opened and closed the door a few times; the light went on and off with it.

She pushed the door open further and peered into the room. It was furnished with an old-fashioned washstand with a basin and jug of plain white porcelain, matching chest of drawers and wardrobe, a double-size bed, and a single bedside table, which held the lamp and an alarm clock. A small table and chair stood beneath the room's only window. The linens and drapes were white and unornamented. In the opposite corner of the room was a door that probably led to a private commode room

containing a necessary, bathtub, and sink which, through an amazing new combination of magic and machinery, would be supplied with hot and cold water right there in the room. The Professors' quarters were regularly updated with such conveniences and luxuries, and much had been made of the installment of the modern new water systems. She hadn't seen them for herself; when she needed to excuse herself, she used the old-fashioned water closet at the end of the third-floor hall which was there for the convenience of students, Assistants, and orderlies.

Perarre longed to go into the bedroom and look inside the wardrobe and chest of drawers, to see if the Professor owned anything besides his black suits and cravats and white shirts and collars. Instead, she backed away and firmly shut the door. What would he think if he came back and found her snooping in his bedroom? *Who are you, Professor Rossony?* she wondered.

She went back to the work table and forced herself to get back to her task. But before she could finish translating another page, the door opened and the Professor came in. "They said yes!" His face and eyes shone with excitement.

Perarre stood up and hurried over to him. "They finally approved your request?"

"One month's use of books from the restricted books collection. And you'll be translating for me."

Perarre stared at him, hardly daring to believe what he had said. Access to restricted books... Every Scholar's dream, a privilege rarely granted. "That's wonderful! I —"

He grabbed her shoulders and crushed his mouth against hers.