

LORD OF SOULS

An Elder Scrolls® Novel



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PART I



PROLOGUE



Attrebus never saw the thing that cut open his belly and sent his guts spilling out into his arms. It happened in the dark, and the only things he remembered other than the agony was the stink of his bowels and something like rotting ginger—and Sul dragging him along, cursing in a language Attrebus didn't understand.

Now the pain—for so long the only thing real to him—was fading as his body finally understood it was done.

It was possible he was dead already—he wasn't sure what death was supposed to be like. He hadn't paid that much attention to such things when he should have.

He started, as from a dream of falling, and for a moment he thought he *was* falling, because all of his weight had vanished. With an effort he opened his eyes, but there wasn't much to see; the air was full of ash, a gray cloud that extended in every direction. He saw his companion Sul a few yards from him but steadily drifting off. Presently the dust would make him a shadow, and then nothing at all.

It was hard to breathe; the gray powder cloyed in his nostrils

and mouth. After a few more breaths he realized that soon enough his lungs would fill up with the stuff and that would be that.

It was so hard to care. He was weak, tired, and even if he lived, the things he still had to do seemed impossible. No one could blame him if he quit, could they? Not now.

No one would even know.

And so he drifted, the ash caking his blood-soaked gambeson and hands, enclosing him like a shroud, preparing him almost gently for the moment his heart finally stopped.

In the darkness behind his eyes little sparks appeared and died, each dimmer than the last, until only one remained, fading. In it he saw the face of a young woman, tiny as with distance, and from somewhere heard a vast chorale of despair and terror that seemed to fill the universe. He saw his father on a burning throne, his face blank, as if he didn't realize what was happening to him. The wavering colors expanded, pushing the murk away, and the woman appeared again as his father faded. He knew her features, her curling black hair, but he couldn't remember her name. He noticed she was holding something up for him to see; a little doll that looked like him, but couldn't be him, because it was stronger, smarter, better than he was, made in the image of a man incapable of giving in or giving up.

She kissed the doll lightly on the head and then looked at him expectantly.

And so, beginning to weep, he cracked his dust-caked lips and summoned the air that remained in his lungs.

"Sul," he croaked.

The other man was hardly visible, a darker patch in the ash.

"Sul!" This time he managed to shout it, and pain lanced through him again.

"Sul!" Now it seemed to thunder in his ears, and everything spun. He thought he saw a sort of orange flash out in the gray, a

sphere that appeared, expanded, passed through him, and then went on beyond his sight.

But it might have been the agony, taking him away.

Yet the light remained, the images continued. He saw the doll again, lying near this time, on a little gray bed. Its head was porcelain, and not unlike a hundred such likenesses of himself he'd seen over the years. The cloth of the torso was torn open, and the stuffing was coming out. As he watched, huge hands took up the doll and poked the stuffing back in, but there wasn't enough to fill it, so one of the hands vanished and returned with a wad of gray and shoved that in, too, before sewing up the doll with a needle and thread. When all the stitches were made and pulled tight, a knife came down to cut it.

He screamed, as air sucked into his lungs and a thousand pins seemed to sink into every inch of his flesh. He tried to vomit, but nothing came up, and he lay there sobbing, knowing nothing could ever be the same, that nothing would ever seem as bright or clean as it might have once. He cried like a baby, without coherent thought, without shame. A long time he did that, but in the end there remained something so hard and insoluble that it could never be made into tears and drained away. But he could feel the bitterness of it and make it anger, and in that he found at least a shadow of resolve, something he could nurse and make stronger in time.

He opened his eyes.

He lay inside a room like a gray box, with no discernable entrance or exit. Light seemed to filter through the walls themselves—he cast no shadow. The air had a stale, burnt taste, but he was no longer choking, and his chest rose and fell.

He sat up and his hands went reflexively to his belly. He realized then that he was naked, and he saw that a thick white scar ran from his crotch up to the base of his sternum.

“Divines,” he gasped.

"I wouldn't invoke them here," a feminine voice warned.

He swung his head around and saw her. She was as naked as he, sitting with her knees drawn up to her chest. Her hair was rosy gold, her skin alabaster white, her eyes twin emeralds. She had the slender, pointed ears of an elf.

"Do you know where we are?" he asked.

"In Oblivion," she said. "In the realm of Malacath."

"Malacath," he murmured, touching his scar. It was still tender.

"That is what he calls himself," the woman said.

"My name is Attrebus," he said. "Whom do I have the honor of addressing?"

"You may call me Silhansa," she replied.

"How long have you been here, Silhansa?" he asked.

"Not much longer than you," she said. "At least I think not. It's hard to tell, with no sun or moon, only the endless gray."

"How did you end up here?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure."

He paused, to give her a chance to ask something of him if she wished, but when she showed no sign of doing so, he pressed on.

"How do you know this is Malacath's realm? Have you seen him?"

"I heard a voice, and he said his name. That's all I know. But I'm frightened." She paused, and she looked as if she had forgotten something. "What about you? How did you get here?"

"It's a long story," he said.

"Please," Silhansa said. "Your voice calms me. What brought you to this terrible place?"

"I had a companion," Attrebus said. "A Dark Elf—a Dunmer—named Sul. Have you seen him?"

"Yours is the only face I have seen since coming here," she said. "Tell me your story, please."

Attrebus sighed. "Where are you from?" he asked.

“Balfiera,” she replied.

He nodded. “So we’re both from Tamriel—that helps. I’m from Cyrodiil, myself.” He scratched his chin and found a beard. How much time had passed?

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll try to explain. Not long ago, a thing entered our world from Oblivion, an island that floats through the air, with a city upon it. Wherever the island flies, all those beneath it die and rise up again, undead. My companion and I were pursuing this island.”

“Why?”

“To stop it, of course,” he said, understanding how arrogant he sounded, how stupid. “Stop it before it destroyed all of Tamriel.”

“You’re a hero, then. A warrior.”

“Not a very good one,” he said. “But we tried as best we could. Before I met him, my companion Sul was trapped in Oblivion for many years, and knows its ways. Umbriel—that’s the name of the island—was too far away for us to reach in time—”

“In time for what?”

“I’ll get to that in a moment,” Attrebus said.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt, but this is a strange tale.”

“No stranger than being imprisoned by a daedra prince.”

“You have a point there,” she allowed.

“To make it brief,” he said, “Sul took us on a shortcut through Oblivion to get ahead of Umbriel.”

“Did you stop it, then?”

“No,” he said. “We didn’t have a chance. The lord of Umbriel was too strong for us. He captured us and would have killed us, but Sul managed to escape into Oblivion, and brought me with him. But we were lost, far away from the paths Sul knew. We wandered through nightmare places. Just before coming here, we were in the realm of Prince Namira, or at least that’s what Sul thought. Something there did this.” He indicated the scar.

"I've been wondering how anyone could survive such a wound," Silhansa said.

"Me, too," Attrebus replied. "Sul must have gotten us out of Namira's realm. I remember floating in gray ash, choking to death. Then I woke here." He didn't want to think about his dream, much less talk about it.

"And so your quest is ended. I'm sorry."

"It's not ended," he insisted. "I'll find Sul, and we'll get out of here somehow."

"What makes you so determined?"

"It's my people at stake, my world. And there is—someone counting on me, waiting for me. She might be safe, but if she isn't—"

"Ah," Silhansa said knowingly. "A woman. A lover."

"A woman, yes, but she isn't my lover—she's a friend, someone who depends on me."

"But you want her to be your lover."

"I . . . I haven't thought about it, and it's neither here nor there."

"And your friend Sul? He's driven by love as well?"

"Sul? He's driven by vengeance. He hates Vuhon, the master of Umbriel. I think he hates him more than I can imagine hating anything, and I've been expanding my capabilities in that sort of thing lately."

He found himself touching his scar again. Silhansa noticed.

"Do you think Malacath healed you?" she asked.

"Maybe—if this is his realm I suppose it is possible—but I've no idea why. Malacath isn't exactly known for his kindness."

"You know something about him?"

Attrebus nodded. "A little. My nurse used to tell me a story about him. It was one of my favorites."

"Really? Could you tell it? I know little about the daedra."

"I don't tell it as well as she did," he admitted, "but I remember the tale." He paused for a moment, remembering Helna's singsong voice. He closed his eyes and pictured his bed, and her sitting there, hands folded. For just an instant he felt the shadow of the comfort he'd known then, the innocence that had protected him from the world.

"In the bygone-by," he began, "there was a hero named Trinimac, the greatest knight of the Ehlnofoy, champion of the Dragon of Time. One fine day he betook himself to seek out Boethiah, the daedra prince, and chastise him for his misdeeds.

"But Boethiah knew Trinimac was coming, and he put on the appearance of an old woman and stood beside the trail.

" 'Good day, old woman,' Trinimac said when he came along. 'I'm in search of Prince Boethiah, to chastise him. Can you tell me where I might find the scoundrel?'

" 'I know not,' the old woman told him, 'but down the road is my younger brother, and he might know. I'll gladly tell you where he is, if you will but scratch my back.'

"Trinimac agreed, but when he saw her back, it was covered in loathsome boils. Nevertheless, having said he would, he scratched the noisome sores.

" 'Thank you,' she said. 'You'll find my brother on the road to your left at the next crossroads.'

"Trinimac went on his way. Boethiah scurried ahead by a shortcut and put on the appearance of an old man.

" 'Good day, old man,' Trinimac said, on meeting him. 'I saw your elder sister, and she said you might know the path to Prince Boethiah's house.'

" 'I do not,' the old man told him. 'But my little sister knows. I'll tell you where to find her if you will only wash my feet.'

"Trinimac agreed, but found the old man's feet even more disgusting and smelly than the old woman's back. Still, he had made

a bargain. The old man told him where to find the younger sister, and again Trinimac went on—and again Boethiah went ahead, and put on the guise of a beautiful young woman.

“Now, Trinimac was dreading the meeting with the younger sister, fearing he would have to wash or scratch something even worse than he already had, but when he saw the beautiful girl, he felt better.

“‘I met your elder brother,’ he said, ‘and he told me you would know the way to the house of Prince Boethiah.’

“‘Indeed, I do,’ she declared. ‘And I will gladly tell you if you will but give me a kiss.’

“‘That I can do,’ Trinimac said, but as he leaned forward to kiss her, her mouth opened wide—so wide that his whole head went in, and Boethiah swallowed him in a single gulp.

“Then Boethiah took on Trinimac’s form, and made him burp and fart and say foolish things, until finally he squeezed out a great pile of dung, and that was what was left of Trinimac. The dung got up and slunk away in shame, a proud knight no longer. He became Prince Malacath, and all of those who loved him changed as well and became the orcs.”

The woman’s eyes had a peculiar look in them.

“That was your favorite story?” she said.

“When I was seven, yes.”

She shook her head. “You people are always so literal-minded.”

“What do you mean?” A thought occurred. “You’re Altmer, yes? A High Elf? How is it you’ve never heard of Trinimac?”

“I have, of course, heard of Trinimac,” Silhansa said, placing her right hand on the floor, palm up. It seemed to melt and flow into the surface.

“What are you—”

But Silhansa—still crouching—began to grow, and quickly.

And as she grew, she changed; the colors of her eyes and hair faded to gray, her face broadened, became piglike, and tusks emerged. All signs of womanhood vanished, and as she stood, he felt the floor lurch beneath him, realizing that she held him in her palm and was lifting him. The walls of the prison dissolved, and the thing that had called itself Silhansa was now a hundred feet tall. The hand holding him brought him up to the monstrous face, and the other hand came up, too, presenting Sul, as naked as he and just as captive.

“Malacath,” Attrebus gasped.

“So you call me,” Malacath said, his voice like beams of wood rending, his breath a foul wind. His eyes seemed empty, but when Attrebus looked into them, crooked things shimmered into his mind and ate his thoughts.

Their surroundings had changed, too. Around them rose a garden of slender trees, and wound about the trunks were vines festooned with lilylike flowers. A multitude of spheres moved, deep in the colorless sky, as distant and pale as moons. He heard birds chirping, but it was a doleful sound, as if something with a vague memory of having been a bird was trying to reproduce sounds it no longer felt.

“Prince,” Attrebus said, starting to shiver. “I did not mean to insult you. It was only a story I heard as a little boy. I don’t presume—”

“Hush,” Malacath said, and Attrebus choked as his mouth filled once again with ash. “I’ve heard enough from you. You don’t interest me. But you, Sul . . . I remember you. You swore an oath by me once, against your own gods. You’ve slipped through my realm before, without visiting. I am offended.”

“My apologies, Prince,” Sul said. “I was in a hurry.”

“And yet this time you demand my attention. In my own house.”

“Yes, Prince.”

The massive lids of Malacath’s eyes lowered over his eldritch gaze. His nostrils widened.

“It’s still there,” the prince’s voice ground out, almost below the level of hearing. “This place, this shadow of a garden, this echo of something that once was—you know such phantoms, Sul?”

“Yes,” Sul husked.

“You loved a woman, and for her you destroyed your city, your nation, and your people.”

“I did not mean to,” Sul said. “I only meant to save her life. It was Vuhon—”

“Do not diminish yourself. Do not seek to lessen the beauty of the deed.” Malacath opened his eyes and stared at them, and now Attrebus felt as if hot brass was being poured into his skull.

“I have healed your broken body, and that of your companion,” he said. “What should I do with you now?”

“Release us,” Sul said.

“To do what?”

“Destroy Umbriel.”

“You tried. You failed.”

“Because we did not have the sword,” Attrebus managed to gasp through the cloying dust.

“What sword?” The air seemed to thicken, and all the hairs on Attrebus’s arms stood out like quills.

“There is a sword named Umbra—” Attrebus began.

“I know it,” Malacath said. “A tool of Prince Clavicus Vile, a stealer of souls.”

“More than that,” Attrebus replied. “The sword was prison to a creature that also calls itself Umbra. This creature escaped the blade and stole much power from Clavicus Vile, and it is that power that motivates Umbriel, the city Sul and I seek to destroy. We believe that if we can find the sword, we can use it to reimprison this creature and defeat Umbriel.”

Malacath just stared at him for a moment, and then the great head leaned toward one vast shoulder a bit. There was something oddly childlike about the motion.

"I have heard that Vile is weak, and that he searches for something. I have no love for him. Or any of the others." He glanced back at Sul, his vast brows caving into a frown. "How I laughed when you betrayed them, turned your homeland into no less an ash pit than my realm. The proud issue of the Velothi, humbled at last. By one of their own. And still there is the curse you made, unfulfilled."

"You can help him fulfill it," Attrebus blurted. He was shaking uncontrollably, but he tried to keep his voice steady.

"You knew who Sul was the minute you saw him," he went on. "You remember his curse after all these years. You healed us and interviewed me. In disguise. To see what we're up to. To assure yourself that the curse Sul made all those years ago is still walking with him. That he still craves vengeance."

Malacath's head shifted again, and behind him vines collapsed and formed into a cloud of black moths that swarmed about them.

"There are a few things I have a sort of love for," the daedra said. "What Sul carries with him is one of those things. So yes, I will help you further. The sword, Umbra—do you know where it is?"

Sul's mouth set in reluctant lines.

"How else will you go there if I do not send you?"

"Somewhere in Solstheim, I believe," Sul finally replied. "In the hands of someone who wears a signet ring with a draugr upon it."

Malacath nodded; to Attrebus it seemed a mountain was falling toward him.

"I can take you to Solstheim," the prince said. "Do not disappoint me."

Then both gigantic eyes focused on Attrebus. "And you—if I ever have use for you, you will know it."

"Yes, Prince," Attrebus replied.

The god grinned a mouthful of sharp teeth. Then he slapped his palms together.

"It's real," Mazgar gra Yagash breathed, staring, fighting the urge to draw her sword.

It wasn't often you saw a mountain fly.

She doffed her helmet for a better look. As it passed beyond the tallest birches, she saw how it hung in the sky—an inverted mountain, with the peak stabbing toward the land below.

Next, her gaze picked out the strange spires and glistening structures atop the thing, structures that could only have been made by some sort of hands. A forest clung to the upper rim as well, its boughs and branches dropping out and away from it.

"Why would you doubt it?" Brennus asked, his hands working fast with pen and paper, sketching the thing. "It's what we came to see."

"Because it's ridiculous," she said.

"I've never heard an orc use that word," he murmured. "I guess I thought you people believed in everything."

"I don't believe your nose would stand up to my fist," she replied.

"Fair enough," he said. "I don't believe that either. But since I outrank you, I also don't think you'll hit me." He pushed rusty bangs from his face and looked off at the thing. "Anyway—ridiculous or not, there it is. Aren't you supposed to be doing something?"

"Guarding you," she replied.

"I feel so safe."

She rolled her eyes. He was technically her superior, which galled, because he wasn't a soldier—or even a battlemage. Like most of the wizards in the expedition, his expertise was in learning things from a distance. His rank had been awarded by the Emperor, days before they'd left the Imperial City.

But he was probably right—as hard as it was not to stare at the thing, it was their immediate surroundings she ought to be taking in.

They were on a high, bare ridge, about thirty feet from the tree line in any direction. The air was clear and visibility good. Up ahead of her, four of Brennus's fellow sorcerers were doing their mysterious business: chanting, aiming odd devices at the upside-down flying mountain, conjuring invisible winged things she noticed only because they passed through smoke and were briefly outlined. Two others were surrounding their position with little candles that burnt with purple-black flames. They set those up every time they stopped; the candles were somehow supposed to keep all of this conjuring from being noticed by anyone—or anything.

Mazgar put her hand on the ivory grip of Sister—her sword—squinted, and licked her tusks. “I make it about six miles away. What do you reckon?”

“A little more than eight, according to Yaur's ranging charm,” Brennus said.

“Bigger than I thought.”

“Yah.” He put the notebook down and unpacked something that looked like a spyglass but Mazgar figured wasn't. He peered through it, mumbled gobbledygook, turned a dial on the device, and looked again. He scratched his red hair, and his sallow Nibenese features fell in a frown.

“What's the matter?” she asked him.

“It's not there,” he said.

"What do you mean?" she said. "I'm looking right at it."

"Right," he said. "Bit of a contradiction, I know. And I'm sure it *is* there, somehow. But all my glass sees is a bubble of Oblivion."

"A bubble of Oblivion?"

"Yah. You know, the nasty place where the daedra live? Beyond the world?"

"I know what Oblivion is," she gruffed. "My grandfather closed one of the gates Dagon opened between here and there, back when."

"Well, this is like a gate, but wrapped around itself. Pretty odd."

"Does that tell us how to fight it?"

He shrugged. "I can't think how it would," he said. "Anyway, the plan is to not fight it. We're just here to find out what we can and report back to the Emperor. It's still moving north into Morrowind. It may never threaten the Empire at all."

Mazgar looked at the island again. "How can that not be a threat?" she muttered. She felt the coarse hairs on the back of her neck standing and her heart quicken. Brennus was looking at her in apprehension, and she realized she'd been growling in the pit of her throat.

"Don't worry," he said.

"It sees us," she said.

"I doubt that," he replied.

"No," she snapped. "I can feel it, feel its eyes . . ."

"Is this supposed to be some sort of orcish sixth sense? The kind you get from not bathing?"

"I'm not joking, Brennus, something isn't right. I feel—"

But then the wind shifted, and she got the smell.

"Dead things," she snarled, clearing Sister from her sheath. Then she raised her voice. "Alarum!" she howled. She grabbed Brennus by the arm and hustled him toward the other sorcerers, where her fellow warriors were hastily trying to form a phalanx.

She wasn't quite there when they came out of the trees.

"So that's true, too," she said.

"Divines," Brennus breathed.

They looked as dead as they smelled. Many had been Argonians, obvious by their rotting snouts, decayed tails, sharp teeth set in worm-festered gums. Others looked to have been men or mer, and a few were just—things. They moved twitchily, as if uncertain how to use their limbs, but they came at a fast march.

And they *were* marching, organized, falling into ranks as the landscape permitted. They were unevenly armed—some had swords, maces, or spears, but more than half had crude clubs or no weapons at all—but there were a lot of them, many times more than their thirty.

What surprised Mazgar most were their eyes. She had heard the rumors that an army of corpses walked beneath the flying city. She had imagined them as dumb, cattle-eyed beasts. What she saw as they drew near was something different, a glitter of malicious intelligence, a dark joy in the harm they promised.

"They're coming up from the south, too," someone shouted.

That was bad news. They'd left the horses and most of the supplies down there, not to mention their remaining six soldiers to guard them.

"Form up," Captain Falcus hollered. "We've got fighting to do."

"I thought they were supposed to be under the island," Mazgar said. "These are a long way from it."

"Well," Brennus replied, "there's the value of scouting, eh? Now we know something we didn't before. They can send their troops out. Way out."

"We can't let them trap us up here," Falcus said. "We're going to have to pick a direction and cut through."

"South takes us home, Captain," Merthun the Wall shouted.

"South it is," the captain said. "Re-form, now."

Mazgar moved to the back of the formation, along with Jar-row, Merthun, and Coals. She pulled her shield off her back and got ready, watching the rotting things approach.

"And you thought this wasn't going to be any fun," Brennus said, at her back.

Falcus shouted, and the phalanx started moving behind her. Mazgar and her line walked backward, slowly. The dead sped up, and when they were six yards away, they charged.

She howled, and Sister swung at something that had once been a two-legged lizard. The sword smashed into its head and it split open, spilling maggots and putrescence all around her. The body came on, and so she slashed at it, still retreating.

Just up the line she heard Jarrow curse and gurgle.

"Jarrow's down," Merthun shouted. "Close the gap."

They fell back, yard by yard, leaving a wake of rotting, twitching parts. She saw Jarrow's body, facedown, receding.

Then she saw him start to rise, surrounded by the things.

"Jarrow's still alive!" she bellowed.

"He's not," Merthun shouted back, his huge hammer rising and falling into the line of the enemy.

"But—" she began. Then she saw Jarrow's wound and the dark gleam in his eye, and knew it wasn't him anymore.

"Well, that's no good," Brennus opined.

"There's the south line," Falcus shouted. "Double time, soldiers. Rearguard, keep them off. We break through or die."

"I'm not dying here," Mazgar snarled, and let Sister do her work.

ONE



Wind opened Colin's eyes, but it was the unfastened window that sped his heart, and the utter lack of sound that sent his fingers to the knife under his mattress. A hand met his there and gripped his wrist, hard. He swung over to kick at the vague shadow, but he was grasped at the ankles as well, and a bag was forced over his head, followed by a return to sleep that would have been gentle if part of him wasn't screaming to the rest that he wouldn't ever wake up.

He did wake again, however. The bag and the cloying scent of somnolence remained, but the drug itself was obviously dissipated. He was lying on a hard but inconstant surface, and he soon recognized by the motion that he was in a boat, on water. His hands and feet were efficiently bound. His captors did not speak, but he could hear their breathing and exertions at the oars. He couldn't make out anything through the sack except light, but he felt the sun on his skin and guessed it was approaching midday.

Not much later, there was a bit of jostling and then the shock of the boat coming on shore. He smelled pine.

They cut the bindings on his feet and made him walk. He

kept thinking he ought to say something, but his kidnappers behaved so professionally he knew there wasn't much point. There was no talking them out of whatever they were doing with him. All he could do was wait, and wonder. Would he feel it? Would he know anything had happened?

Colin killed a man once. He died confused, begging, unwilling to admit even as the knife cut into him what was happening.

He wished he could have seen his mother again, and—realizing he was weeping—felt ashamed. He'd wanted to be braver.

The hand on his arm came away. He tried not to shake.

Then one of the men made a peculiar sound, a sigh like a very tired man finally lying down.

"What?" the other asked, before sucking a sharp breath.

Colin heard two distinct thumps—then for a moment, nothing. He wondered if he should run.

"Who do you work for?" a feminine voice asked.

He recognized it, and a deep chill wracked through him. The last time he'd heard that voice had been in a house in the Market District, just before its owner slaughtered at least eight men.

"Come," she said. "Tell me."

"I'm not at liberty to say," he replied.

"Keep still," she said. A moment later the sack came off his head.

And there she was, regarding him, Letine Arese. Her small frame, turned-up nose, and short blond hair made her seem almost like a little girl, but he knew her to be thirty-one years of age, and her blue eyes held a cold intensity that was quite unchildlike.

Those eyes narrowed now.

"You look familiar," she said. "I've seen you. I suppose that makes sense."

He glanced behind her, at the two bodies on the ground. Both

were male; one was an Argonian, the other a Bosmer. They both seemed quite dead, although he could not see the cause.

"They brought you out here to kill you," she said.

"I gathered that," he replied. "I'm grateful you stopped them."

"Are you? We'll get back to that in a moment." She folded her hands behind her back. She was dressed in Bosmer woodsman style, with high boots and soft leather vest and breeches. It was an odd look for her, in his experience—he'd only ever seen her in relatively fashionable city attire.

"What would you say if I told you they worked for me?" she asked.

"I would be confused," Colin said carefully.

"Yes, I should hope so," she told him. "They noticed you spying on me and brought it to my attention. So of course, I did a little checking of my own. Colin Vineben, from Anvil. Your father is dead, and your mother does laundry. You were recommended for and received training for the Penitus Oculatus, and recently were named an inspector in that organization. It was you who discovered the massacre of Prince Attrebus's personal guard and the apparent murder of the prince, and you who suggested to the Emperor that the prince wasn't actually dead. Which, as it turns out, you were right about. And now you're spying on me, but without, it seems, any official authority to do so. So I wonder if you're employed by someone else."

"Why did you kill them?" he asked.

"Because otherwise, I would have had to kill you," she snapped. "Now I have to account for them, pretend I sent them on a mission to someplace fatal. Otherwise, the two of them would have wondered why you were still walking, and after a while that wonder would have spread its way up to the minister himself."

"I don't understand," Colin said.

"I'm risking my neck for you, you idiot," Arese snapped suddenly. "Can't you see that?"

"I can see it," he replied. "I just don't get why."

She pulled a knife from her belt and stalked toward him. His chest tightened, but she merely cut the ropes that held his hands behind his back. Then she stepped back a bit and untied her pants, loosening the laces and pulling one side down, exposing her hip.

"You know what that is?" she asked, indicating a small black tattoo of a wolf's head.

He did, of course. It was the Emperor's personal brand, worn only by his innermost circle.

He didn't say anything, but she saw he recognized it, and pulled the breeches back up, tying them again.

"He put me in the minister's office ten years ago," she said. "No one knows but him and me. And now you."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I need help, and I think we may have a common purpose."

"What's that?"

"To discover why Minister Hierem wants Prince Attrebus dead."

"Does he?"

"I should know," she said. "I made the arrangements for the ambush on his orders."

"Why?" Colin exploded. "If you're loyal to the Emperor—"

She barked a laugh. "You *knew*," she said. "You were there, weren't you? When I took care of Calvur and his thugs. I *knew* someone was there!" She closed her eyes for a moment, looking very tired.

"I didn't mean for the prince to come to harm," she said. "If I could have gotten word to the Emperor, I would have. It was im-

possible at the time, at least without revealing myself to Hierem. In the end, a decision had to be made.”

“And you decided you were more important than the prince?”

“Yes. If you knew anything about him, you would probably agree.”

“And yet Hierem wants him dead.”

“Apparently.”

“Then why hasn’t the Emperor had the minister arrested?”

“When the Emperor first placed me in the ministry, he didn’t have any particular worries about Hierem, only the sort of general paranoia a successful monarch must have. For most of the past ten years, the minister has been above suspicion, but a year or so ago he began testing me, first subtly, then overtly. It became clear he wanted his own private intelligence and eliminations organization, one not connected to the Penitus Oculatus or known to the Emperor. The attack on Attrebus was—surprising. I didn’t see that coming. It’s only because some of the assassins got greedy that the prince survived. The Emperor isn’t ready to move against Hierem yet because he doesn’t believe we know everything, and because the minister is politically important—very important. The Emperor has survived because he waits until he knows where all the forces are and their strengths before he strikes. Right now, Hierem thinks his actions are invisible. We want to keep it that way a bit longer. That’s where you come in, if you’re up to it.”

“Up to what?”

“Hierem trusts me now, completely I believe. But that limits me. And I can’t trust anyone else in the ministry. I can open certain doors, but I need someone who can walk through them. Can you be that man?”

Colin considered for a moment. Arese might be telling the

truth and she might be lying; in a way, it didn't matter. If he agreed to help her, it gave him a chance to find the answers he sought, even if she was steering him away from them. If he told her no, it was pretty certain he was staying on this island for eternity.

"I can be that man," he told her.

TWO



When he smelled blood, Mere-Glim turned in the deep waters of the Marrow Sump, trying to find the source. Blood wasn't an unusual smell in these waters; bodies were dumped here every day, many still feebly struggling against death. But this blood was not only fresh, it had a certain rotten scent he'd come to know all too well.

He closed his eyes and flared his reptilian nostrils, and when he identified the current that carried the smell, he struck out along it, his webbed hands and feet propelling him swiftly through the clear waters. It took him only a few moments before he could see the erratically twitching figure trying to reach the surface.

By the time he reached her, the life was dimming from her eyes. He wasn't sure if she ever actually saw him. Blood still roiled in clouds from her nostrils and gaping mouth. He reached around her from behind and kicked purposefully toward the surface, but by the time he reached it, she had gone limp.

He took her into the skraw caves along the shoreline anyway, and laid her out on the little bier his coworkers had made from

woven cane and grass for the dead to rest on. In the sunlight she'd looked old, worn, with black bags beneath her eyes and hair like lank kelp, but here in the phosphorescence from the cave walls she appeared younger, more like the ten or fifteen years she probably actually was. On Umbriel, people were born as adults, and those born to be skraws, to tend and harvest the sump, had nothing that resembled a childhood.

He heard others approaching and looked over his shoulder to see his friend Wert and a young skraw named Oluth.

"Jocain," Wert sighed. "I knew she couldn't last much longer."

"I'm sorry," Glim told him. "I couldn't reach her in time."

"It wouldn't have mattered," Wert said. "If you had, she might have lived another day."

"A day is a day," Glim said.

Wert knelt and studied the woman's face for a long moment, his own visage more long and doleful than usual.

"When do we move forward?" he asked without looking up. "Isn't it time to take the next step?"

"We're done with the maps," Oluth blurted. He was young, probably no more than three years old; his skin had only the barest hint of the jaundice that plagued the older skraws.

"Good," Glim replied.

"So—like Wert said—what's next?" the hatchling went on eagerly.

"I'm still planning that," Glim told him.

"You excited everyone, Glim," Wert said. "You gave us all hope. But now—some say that you're stalling."

"We have to be prepared," Glim said. "We have to be careful. Once we start, there's no turning back. Does everyone understand that?"

"They do," Wert said. "They're ready to do what you say, Glim. But you have to say something."

Glim felt his heart sink. "Soon," he said.

"How soon?"

"I'll let you know."

Wert frowned, but nodded. Then he turned to Oluth.

"Go with Glim. He'll show you about the lower sump. You'll be working down there with him."

"It'll be an honor," Oluth said.

Glim waited for Oluth to go take the vapors and felt guilty. The caustic fumes allowed the skraws to breathe underwater, but they also killed them young, as they had just killed Joacin. Of all the skraws, he was the only one who hadn't been born on Umbriel, the only Argonian—the only one who didn't need the vapors to breathe beneath the surface.

When the youngster joined him in the shallows, Glim took him down below the midway of the cone-shaped body of water and showed him the cocooned figures fastened to the wall. Inside each was something that had started as a worm smaller than his least claw, but were now in various stages of becoming inhabitants of Umbriel. He brushed against one near term, a lanky female who—in appearance—would be human. Next to her grew a brick-red creature with horns, and farther along a man with the dusky skin of a Dunmer. All began as worms, however, and beneath appearances they were all Umbrielians. He tried not to be annoyed by Oluth's eagerness as he explained the procedures for tending the unborn and moving them to the birthing pools when their time came, and how to know that time. He could tell the boy was only half paying attention. He kept glancing around, especially down, to the bottom of the sump, where the actinic glare of the connexion with the ingenium lay.

"You're curious about that?" Glim asked.

"That's the ingenium," Oluth said. "That's the heart and soul of Umbriel. If we controlled *that* . . ."

"Even if we could do it," Glim said, "that would be too much."

“But if we’re to really revolt, carry the fight to the lords—”

“SSht, husst, slow down,” Glim said. “Who ever said anything about taking the fight to anyone? Or fighting at all?”

“Well, I guess we thought it would come to that,” Oluth said.

“Who is ‘we’?” Glim asked.

“Oh.” He looked embarrassed. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“The younger skraws. We call ourselves the Glimmers. We’ve pledged to follow you and help you.”

Glim absorbed that, feeling claustrophobic.

“Listen to me,” he said. “Our goals are simple: We want a substitute for the vapors, so you don’t have to tear your lungs up and die early just to do your job. We’re looking for ways to inconvenience the lords, to make them aware of your needs. We don’t want it to come to a fight.”

“Right,” Oluth said. “Inconvenience them. Like how?”

“Well, what do we skraws do? We keep the sump working. That means food, water, nutrients for everyone on Umbriel and the fringe gyre—and of course, we bring the newborns into the world. We just need to emphasize our worth by showing what happens if things don’t get done down here—or if things break, clog up, and so forth. Do you understand?”

Oluth nodded vigorously. “I do!” he said. Then his gaze darted past Glim. “What’s that?”

Glim followed his regard to a small embryo sac, nearly transparent, and the thing curled in it. It was still small, but it wasn’t like a baby—more like an unfinished and undersized adult. It had scales and was a pale pink color with huge eyes and tiny little claws.

“It’s an Argonian,” he said.

“It looks a little like you.”

“Soon enough it will look a lot like me,” Mere-Glim said. “I’m an Argonian.”

He'd known it was going to happen, but now that it had, he felt a sort of sick spot in his gut.

He needed to see Annaïg.

"I really am sorry I tried to kill you," Slyn told Annaïg.

Annaïg blinked and glanced up at the gray-skinned woman fidgeting across the table from her.

"Have you tried again, or is this still about last week?" she asked.

Slyn's red eyes widened. "I haven't tried again, I swear."

"Right. So you've apologized already," Annaïg said. "This means you're now wasting my time."

Slyn didn't reply, but she didn't leave either, just stood there, shuffling her feet a bit. Trying not to let her irritation show, Annaïg bent back to her task of emulsifying horse brains and clove oil, whisking the gray matter vigorously and adding the oil a few drops at a time. When it reached the consistency of mayonnaise, she set it aside.

Slyn was still standing there.

"What?" Annaïg exploded.

"I—you haven't assigned anything for me to do."

"Fine. I assign you to go sit in our quarters."

"I have to work," Slyn said. "Toel thinks little enough of me as it is. If he finds me idle—I worry, Annaïg."

Annaïg closed her eyes and counted to four. When she opened them, she half expected to see Slyn lunging at her with a knife, but Slyn was still just standing there looking pitiful.

"Go husk the durian," she said.

"But—"

"What now?"

"Durian is so *smelly*." She waved the back of her hand at Annaïg's preparations. "What are you doing there?"

She's just spying, Annaïg thought. Trying to steal my ideas.

It didn't matter, though, did it?

"I'm extracting terror," she said.

"Come again?"

She lifted the emulsion. "Terror, fear, happiness—any strong emotion leaves something of itself in the brain."

"But if the soul has fled, hasn't all of that gone with it?"

Annaïg smiled, despite the company, and scraped some of the emulsion into a glass cylinder, divided three-quarters of the way down by a thin membrane.

"What's that?" Slys asked, indicating the divider.

"It's the humorous membrane from a chimera-eel," she replied. "It's what allows them to change color to suit their emotions. I've altered this one to let only terror through."

"You're filtering horse-terror through eel-skin?"

"Very specially prepared eel-skin," she replied. She placed the tube in a small centrifuge and cranked the handle, spinning the vial. After a few moments she detached it and held it up, showing a pale yellow ichor in the bottom.

"That's terror?" Slys said. She sounded skeptical.

"Do you want to understand this or not?" Annaïg asked.

"I do. Please. I'm sorry."

"Sit down, then—you're making me nervous, hovering there."

Slys scootched onto a stool and folded her hands in her lap.

"You were right, in a way—terror—or any emotion—isn't merely chemical. But the substance acts as a vessel, a shaper of soul stuff, just as—at a higher level—does the brain and body." She opened a small valve on the bottom of the tube and let the liquid empty into a small glass cone. She then sealed a second, identical cone base-to-base with the first to form a spiculum. She shook the container so that the liquid coated the interior surface

evenly, then slid the whole thing into a coil of translucent fibers that in turn was connected to a pulsing cable of the same material that came up through the floor and workbench.

“Now we pass soul energy through it,” Annaïg said. “The chemical terror will attract what it needs to become the real thing.”

For a moment nothing happened; then the spiculum took on a faint lavender glow, and quite abruptly became opaque. Annaïg waited another moment then removed the spiculum and shook it again. The coating inside the crystal sloughed free and settled into one end, a viscous powder. She unsealed the hlzu gum that held the spiculum together with spirits of coatin. Then she emptied a bit of the newly formed substance into a horn spoon and carefully handed it to Slyr.

“And there you have it,” she said.

Slyr blinked at the lavender stuff.

“Am I to taste this?”

“You may if you wish.”

“Perhaps not,” Slyr said, dipping her finger into it experimentally. A bit clung there, and she rubbed it back and forth. “It feels—” But then her face transformed; her eyes became huge, and the veins on her neck stood out as she suddenly began shrieking. She fell from her stool and twisted into a fetal position, fighting for the air she needed to keep screaming.

“Or you can just touch it,” Annaïg said. “It’s absorbed just as readily through the skin.”

Slyr’s only response was to quiver uncontrollably—she was past screaming now.

For Annaïg, the next few seconds stretched thin and brittle; part of her wanted to continue watching the other woman suffer. Anger was beautiful, because its core was the absence of all doubt. When anger wrapped you up in yourself and you knew that you

were right and righteous—that the very universe was in agreement with you—at that moment you were a god, and anyone who crossed or disagreed with you was worse than wrong, they were heretics, apostates, twisted in the very womb. Slyr deserved this. And much, much more.

Then why, beneath the wonderful, purifying rage, did she feel sick? Why did she suspect that *she* was the one in the wrong?

Because she wasn't really angry at Slyr. She was angry because all her hopes of escaping Umbriel were destroyed. She was angry at the stupidity of a little girl who thought she could save the world like a hero from the songs, and now was going to spend what little of her life remained in a disgusting place among disgusting people.

And one of those people was Slyr. But somehow she couldn't watch her lose her mind.

So, with a sigh, she unstoppered the bottle she'd fixed for herself, in case she had an accident during the experiment, and waved it under Slyr's nose. The other woman inhaled, gasped, gave one great shake, then sagged. She was still breathing hard but her eyes were clear.

"S-Summpslurry," Slyr managed, her breath still ragged.

She traveled her gaze over her body, as if fearing she was missing limbs.

"You stopped it, didn't you? You could have let it go on and on."

"For a few hours, yes."

"It would have driven me mad."

Annaïg shrugged, still feeling angry and helpless, and now trying not to cry. What was wrong with her?

"I'm not so convinced you're sane as it is," she said.

Slyr chuckled harshly. "I soiled myself," she said.

"I didn't need to know that," Annaïg replied.

"I guess not." Her eyes dropped down. "Toel doesn't care

what happens to me. No one does. No one would have even reprimanded you—”

“I’m not like you, Slyr,” Annaïg said.

Slyr shakily came to her feet and gathered her clothing around her.

“Maybe not,” she said. “But you’re closer than you were.”

And then she left. Annaïg almost thought the woman had a faint look of triumph on her face.

When Slyr was gone, Annaïg’s tears came.

For a long time after being trapped on Umbriel, she hadn’t cried. She watched the city she grew up in destroyed, and although she hadn’t seen it, in her heart she knew her father was dead, and Hecua, and every other soul she had ever known before coming to this place, to Umbriel—which was responsible for all of that murder. She had kept it all in, bound up with hope and purpose, freighted by the need to survive to get from one day to the next—and yes, at times by wonder, by the sheer alien assault on the senses that was Umbriel.

But after Slyr poisoned her, those bands began to fray, and when at last she was ready to escape, to leave Umbriel, they had broken, because she wouldn’t have to live each day in fear any longer, because she didn’t need such unnatural control. And then she and Mere-Glim had flown out across the night to where Prince Attrebus was waiting, with *his* strength, his courage to sustain her.

But Umbriel hadn’t let them go, and now . . .

“You cry far too much,” a soft voice said behind her.

She closed her eyes, but he knew, so she didn’t bother to wipe them. It would only show further weakness.

She turned with her cheeks still glistening and stood up from her stool.

“Chef Toel,” she said.

When she first met Toel, she’d thought him darkly, devilishly

handsome, and his unbelievably blue eyes had absorbed her. Now he only seemed dangerous, like a viper.

He looked meaningfully at the purplish substance in the crystal cone.

“What have you there?” he asked

“Terror, Chef.”

“Well, give us a taste, then.”

She hesitated. “It’s quite strong, Chef.”

“I’ll take care, then.”

She doled him out a bit and watched as he carried it to his lips and let it touch his tongue. His eyes widened dreamily and he hissed before taking several shuddering breaths. Little sparks danced on his skin, and she felt the tiny hairs on her face pull toward him.

Then he looked down at her, his gaze still a little strange.

“Exquisite,” he murmured. “You have so much talent, little one. Such beautiful ideas. If only you had—well, a little drive. A bit of ambition.”

He smiled slightly. “I saw Slyn. She looked as if she’d seen the worst thing in the world.”

“She tasted it, Chef.”

“You let her?”

“I did.”

“Well, well. An improvement. But why is she still walking? She hasn’t a constitution for such things, as I do. I think it should have destroyed her mind.”

“I gave her an antidote,” Annaïg admitted.

He stared at her a moment, then made a slight tsking sound beneath his breath. His eyes—which had held her with a certain sparkle—dulled and shifted.

“Very well, then,” he said. “Bring that around. I’ve a mind to use it in seasoning the suspiration of hare and sulfur I’m preparing for Lord Irrel’s thirty-third course. A little something differ-

ent for him. And perhaps, if you could, also make me a bit of remorse?”

“I’m not certain a horse can feel remorse, Chef.”

“Very well,” he said. “Kohnu was badly burned this morning distilling phlogiston. I shall send his brain over.”

“But if he’s still alive—”

“Healing him would take time and resources, and he wouldn’t be able to work for weeks. He’ll serve me better this way.”

She knew Kohnu. He was funny, always telling little self-effacing jokes and clowning about with the produce.

“Chef—” she began.

He rolled his eyes. “It’s not as if you have to kill him yourself,” he said. Then he left.

She sat back down, trembling.

“What am I doing?” she whispered. She needed Glim.

“What *are* you doing?” Mere-Glim asked the next night, at their weekly meeting. It took place in an old slurry filter, empty and forgotten a few yards below the pantry. From it Annaïg could hear what was going on in the kitchens—which at night was usually nothing—and Glim was only feet away from the tube that would take him back down into the sump, if anyone approached.

“I’m trying to figure out why we can’t leave,” she told him. “It’s got something to do with the way Umbriel uses souls, I’m pretty sure. At least it’s a place to start. But I can’t just experiment without producing anything, or Toel would start thinking I’m no longer useful. And if that happens, well—it’s over. Just ask poor Kohnu.”

“You’re doing what you have to do,” Glim said. “You can’t feel bad because of what Toel does.”

“He might have let Kohnu live if it wasn’t for me.”

“Might-have and mud are fine places to wallow,” Glim said.

“That’s easy for you to say,” Annaïg replied. “You haven’t gotten anyone killed.” She clenched her fists. “I’ve gotten a lot of people killed, Glim, not just Kohnu. Everyone in Qijne’s kitchen. And probably Attrebus.”

“Still no word from him?”

“No,” she said miserably. “I talked to him just before we tried to escape. He was in our path, Glim. I fear the worst.”

“You don’t know, though,” Glim said. “He might have lost Coo, or maybe he’s somewhere the enchantment doesn’t work.”

“Maybe.”

“But even if something happened to him, it’s not your fault.”

“If I knew more, had more to tell him—”

“You’ve done more than he could have ever expected,” Glim replied. “More than I’ve ever done.”

“Nonsense. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t understand half of what I do. You found me, Glim. I couldn’t have found you. And all of those maps—I still don’t know why the skraws helped you with that.”

“Well,” Glim said, sighing, “I sort of promised them something.”

“What do you mean?”

He was silent for a moment. “Do you remember, back when we tried to escape, you said something about having invented a way of breathing underwater?”

“Sure. Why do you ask?”

He wiggled his hands in clear agitation.

“What?”

“The skraws,” he said at last. “Those who work in the sump, like me—none of them can naturally breathe underwater. They inhale vapors that allow them to, but the vapors are really bad for

them. They live in agony and die young.” He looked up. “I was wondering if you could make them something else, something that won’t hurt them.”

She thought about that, and then found herself answering carefully.

“I could,” she said. “It’s easy for me to sneak the things I need to make an ounce or two of anything. But you would need more than that—a lot more than that—to make a difference. I would have to set up a generation vat. I don’t think I can do that without permission, but if I managed to, it would be noticed and I would be in big trouble.”

“Maybe you can get permission,” he said.

“If I bring up the skraws, Toel will wonder why I know anything about them and why I care. He considers caring a weakness, and he already thinks I’m about as weak as they come. And he might find out about you.” She paused, and then went on even more cautiously. “Anyway—our goal is to bring Umbriel down, remember? Before it destroys our world?”

“The skraws don’t have anything to do with that,” he said. “They just work and die.”

“Are you—” She laughed suddenly.

“What?”

“After all that making fun of me and my causes. You’ve got one, haven’t you?”

“They—They sort of made me their leader.”

“Why?”

“I told them we might be able to make things better if we—umm—organized a little.”

“Organized? You’re leading a *revolt*?”

“I didn’t mean to,” he replied miserably. “I mean, they kind of got the idea from me when I stood up to an overseer, and then—well, I might have suggested that they make some maps for me.”

"Maps?"

"So I could find you. So we could escape."

"Oh. And now that we're stuck here—"

"They seem to expect me to follow through."

"Well, I guess they do," she said. "Will you?"

His pupils expanded and shrank, and then he nodded. "I think so," he said. "It's not right, how they live."

"You can think of it this way, too," Annaïg told him. "The more of them you've got looking for ways to sabotage things, the more likely you'll find some way to stop Umbriel altogether. That connection with the ingenium you told me about, for instance. We need to know more about that."

"Right," he said, but he sounded a bit uneasy.

"Glim," she said, taking his chin between her fingers.

"Yes?"

"I'm glad you care about these people. I'm glad you found a cause. And if there is any way to save the skraws, I'm all for it. But if it comes down to them or our world—if all of these people and the two of us thrown into the bargain have to die to stop this thing—that's what we have to do. You know that, don't you?"

He nodded, but there was an odd stiffness to it.

"Look," she said. "The kitchens are highly competitive, right? If the skraws raise enough ruckus, the lords may start looking for an alternative to the vapors. I've got one, ready to go. I just need Toel to ask me for it—understand?"

"I understand," Glim replied.

"We'll start there. But meanwhile you have to keep gathering information, okay? I mean, if I solve the problem of getting us off of this rock, maybe we can take your friends with us. The more information I have, the more alternatives that gives us."

"That makes sense," Glim breathed. "I'll see what I can do. But you—what about this woman who tried to kill you? What

about Toel? If what you say is true, and if he thinks you're weak—I don't want to find you in the sump one day."

"You have your situation to manage," she said softly. "I have mine."

She hugged him and watched him go, but she felt troubled afterward, wondering if she and Mere-Glim were really on the same side anymore.

THREE



A soft cough drew Colin from the papers massed on his desk. Intendant Marall stood a few feet from his table, hands clasped behind his back.

Colin pushed his chair back and came to his feet.

“Intendant,” he acknowledged.

“Inspector,” Marall nodded. Then he just stood there.

“Can I help you, sir?” Colin asked after the moment drew uncomfortably long.

“I’m just wondering if you have anything to report.”

Colin blinked.

If I had anything to report I would have—he began thinking, but quashed it, lest it show on his face.

“Not much, really, sir,” Colin said. “Is there something wrong?”

“You received the latest interceptions.”

“I did, Intendant,” he replied. “I still can’t find any connection between the Thalmor and this—flying city.”

“And yet they must be up to something.”

“Oh, yes, sir, they’re up to plenty,” Colin said. “Thalmor

agents continue to harass the refugee communities in Sentinel and Balfiera—there has been a series of murders in the latter we can pretty confidently assign to them. The pattern is typical—the victims were all of mixed blood or had associations considered by the Aldmeri Dominion to be unclean. It's much worse in Valenwood—our supplies are no longer reliably getting to the rebels there. Sixty were caught and executed last week, along with four of our own men. There's a leak we don't know about, someplace. They know too much about our movements."

"But in all of that—"

"Nothing. No Thalmor connections to the east at all."

Marall looked sour. He took the other chair in Colin's nook, slid it toward Colin's desk, and sat down.

"Have you seen the reports concerning the flying city?"

"I haven't, sir. Since being taken off the Attrebus case—"

"I'm sorry about that. The more so because you were right about everything. But you made Administrator Vel look foolish, and there you go. At least I managed to get you back on something—eh—important."

"I appreciate that, sir."

"I'm going to tell you a few things, Inspector, because I hope you may have some thoughts on them. But you understand you may not repeat them."

"Of course, sir."

"You're aware, I imagine, of the stories in popular circulation concerning this—Umbriel."

"I am. They are based, as I understand, on letters written by Prince Attrebus and sent to his biographers—before he vanished again."

"Yes. They've rather captured the popular imagination. A flying city from Oblivion, populated by strange creatures, destroying all it passes over and creating an army of living dead from the corpses."

"I've heard all of that."

"Well, we've a good bit of information from our scouts now," Marall said. "It's all basically true. There are just a few new details. Umbriel—apparently the name of this thing—landed at Lilmoth and proceeded in a straight line toward, it appears, Vvardenfell. It is indeed accompanied by some sort of reanimated corpses, and those who die beneath it also rise again. But here's the thing—the cities of Gideon and Stormhold were both overrun. Do you see what that means?"

"Neither lies between Lilmoth and Vvardenfell," Colin answered after a moment's thought.

"Correct. Apparently this army of the walking dead needn't remain near its creator."

"But do they continue to grow in numbers away from the island? Do they reproduce themselves?"

"That is unclear," Marall replied. "What we do know is that a large force of them has entered Cyrodiil and seems to be making its way toward the Imperial City."

"I see," Colin said.

"Are you certain you've seen no evidence that they might be colluding with the Thalmor? If they strike from the east, and the Dominion from the west, or up the Niben, we could find ourselves in a very precarious state."

"I've seen no evidence that the Thalmor are aware of these goings-on, much less that they are involved with them. Why—if I may ask, sir—why do you feel the Thalmor must be involved?"

"Well, if not them, *someone*." He tugged at the slight beard under his chin. "You were educated concerning the Oblivion crisis, of course."

"Yes, sir."

"The received wisdom in the highest circles is that Tamriel can never be invaded from Oblivion again."

"And yet we have been."

“Yes and no. Umbriel is apparently not entirely *in* our world.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It exists in a sort of pocket of Oblivion.”

“And yet it can affect our world, obviously.”

“Yes. But the consensus opinion of both the Synod and the College of Whispers—who never agree on anything—is that even given its strange nature, Umbriel could not have come into Tamriel even so much as it has without being asked.”

“Asked?”

“Summoned. Conjured. Facilitated. The sort of wizardry one naturally associates with the Thalmor.”

Colin nodded. “More than ever, then,” he said, “I think we’re looking in the wrong place. Once it becomes clear we’re being attacked, I have no doubt that the Dominion will take some advantage of it, but in my opinion that would be to consolidate their hold on Valenwood while our attention is elsewhere. They have a plan, a plan laid out in decades—I don’t see them rushing into some strange alliance with an Oblivion prince or what-have-you.”

“Who then?”

“Why not the An-Xileel?”

“The lizards?” Marall’s voice dripped with contempt. “They’re entirely parochial. Even if they could muster the sort of arcane knowledge this would require, why would they bother? They’re content in their swamps.”

“They invaded Morrowind.”

“For revenge. They stopped their advance decades ago, and haven’t showed the slightest interest in doing anything since then.”

“Except keeping the Empire from reclaiming their territory,” Colin pointed out.

“To my knowledge, we’ve never tried to invade Black Marsh. Who wants it?”

"I just think they might bear looking at," Colin said. "After all, that's where Umbriel first showed up."

Marall looked unconvinced, but then he nodded. "Very well," he said. "I'll make the appropriate reports available to you, and send any requests for whatever else you may need through my office. You were right about the Attrebus thing, after all. But—keep your head low, yes? I don't need this getting back to Vel."

"Understood, sir."

He watched Marall go, and then returned his gaze to the papers, but he wasn't really seeing them.

The Intendant was probably right that the An-Xileel were not a threat. They were entirely nativistic in their views, interested only in purging the former colonial influences and returning Black Marsh to whatever state they imagined it had been in before it was ruled by foreign powers. And technically, of course, Umbriel had appeared somewhere out at sea, so one might just as well suspect the elusive Sload of having helped the flying city conjure its way into Tamriel. After all, they were supposed to be great sorcerers.

He turned it around a few ways and didn't get anything, so he directed his thoughts to his other "case." There wasn't much there either. Despite her dramatic recruitment of him, he hadn't heard from Arese, and since he didn't have anything to tell her, he didn't see any point in risking contact with her.

He got the intelligence from Black Marsh a few hours later. He started with the most recent stuff; both the College of Whispers and the Synod had collected intelligence remotely, but there were also a number of on-the-ground reports. A few had been relayed by riders, but most were also transmitted through sorcerous means. It was mostly information regarding the size and travel path of Umbriel, and the accounts of Stormhold and Gideon seemed somehow light. Feeling he was missing something, Colin

turned to what little they had in the way of information regarding the An-Xileel.

He found something very interesting indeed.

It had rained, and Talos Plaza was awash in reflected torch and lamplight. The air still smelled clean as Colin stepped through the puddles. A troupe of Khajiit acrobats was performing nearby, gracefully tumbling, forming unlikely structures with their feline bodies, juggling sparkling torches. A crowd clapped and tossed coins at their feet. He passed through a group of kids enthusiastically swinging at one another with wooden swords, and felt stiffness in this throat. He'd been like them once. He remembered playing such games. But he couldn't remember at all how it felt.

A few steps to the right, and he stood in the near utter darkness of an alleyway. Here, a man could die—or kill—and those in the plaza with its light and merriment would never be the wiser.

She noticed him too late. If he'd meant to end her, he could have, and she knew it. For the first time since he'd met her, Arese's controlled expression cracked, and he saw something that looked very much like fear. He could almost hear her heart pounding.

"Easy," he said. "I needed to see you. I was afraid to send any sort of message."

She took a step back, swallowed, and the mask went back on.

"How did you know I would come this way?" she asked.

"You usually do. You're on your way to meet your sister at the pub, and you always cut through here." He indicated the narrow lane with a slight twist of his head.

"You've been spying on me?"

"Not lately. Before. I wondered why you come through here rather than staying on the street."

She vented a self-deprecating chuckle. "So I can hear if any-

one is following me," she replied. "No one ever is, and so I've gotten careless. What do you need?"

"I was looking at reports dealing with Black Marsh," he told her. "They've been censored—by Minister Hierem's office."

"That's not terribly surprising," she said.

"How is that?"

"Hierem made a secret trip to Black Marsh last year, ostensibly to negotiate with the An-Xileel leaders. He would have had anything suggesting his presence there removed."

"That explains the older reports," Colin said. "But I'm talking about intelligence gathered recently, concerning the attacks from the flying city."

"That's interesting," Arese replied. "That's really very interesting. You think there's some connection between this and the attempt on Attrebus?"

"I don't think there's any doubt about it," Colin said. "Attrebus was on his way to attack Umbriel. We know that from several sources, including the broadsides posted on every street corner. Clearly Hierem wanted to prevent that, to delay any Imperial confrontation with this thing for as long as possible. Now we know a force from the city is already in eastern Cyrodiil."

"Umbriel has also turned," Arese said. "It is now moving over the Valus Mountains toward the Imperial City."

"Well, then," Colin said, "what we have to ask ourselves is why Hierem wants Umbriel to attack the Imperial City. What's his relationship with it? Do you have any ideas?"

"None. Do you?"

"Well, I think Hierem summoned Umbriel," he said. "Helped it come here, whatever. That suggests he has some sort of bargain with whoever is master of the flying city."

"It does, doesn't it?" Arese said. She frowned. "It will be trouble to get the uncensored documents. He keeps things like that—if he keeps them at all—in his private rooms."

"Did anyone go with him to Black Marsh?" he asked.

"Yes, let me think. He took—" Then her eyes widened.

"Well, that's no good," she said.

"What?"

"He took Delia Huerc. But she's dead."

"Dead? Murdered?"

"An illness of some sort, according to the report, and there wasn't any reason to doubt it. Now—well, what's to be done about it?"

"Anyone else?"

"He hired a merchant ship and traveled in disguise. I'm sure the name of the ship has been removed from any records."

"He had to pay for it."

"He didn't want the Emperor to know, so he probably paid out of pocket. He's not without his own wealth." She looked around. "This is going on too long," she said. "Is there anything else?"

"Delia Huerc. Where did she live?"

"I don't know, but I can get that. Look for a message from me."

"Okay."

She started to go, but then turned. "Good work," she said.

"Thanks."

"Next time, come to my house. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes."

"Of course you do. Come to the window above the alley and tap it four times. If I'm there, I'll come. And watch your back. Things are getting very paranoid in the ministry. There are questions where there shouldn't be."

"I'll be careful," he said.

She nodded and started walking.

"You be careful, too," he said.

She paused for an instant, but didn't look back, and then continued on her way.

FOUR



Annaïg stared out at the shimmering green sump and delicate, insectile buildings that climbed and depended from the stone walls of the conical valley at Umbriel's heart. Above, shining through the glittering strands of what resembled a giant spider-web or some vast sea invertebrate, shone the sun of Tamriel. The sun she had been born under. It made her feel tight, claustrophobic, to know the light of that sun could illumine the flying city, touch her, warm her—but that she could not go up through that sky, be in the wider world that orb washed with its radiance.

“You’ve not been here in a while,” Toel said.

Annaïg forced herself to look at him. She had first seen Toel when he and his staff had slaughtered everyone in her former kitchen—everyone but Slyr and her. Even then, surrounded by brutally murdered corpses, he’d been calm, serene really. She had been terrified of him then, and was even more so now. She felt that at any moment he would stand, take her by the shoulders, and push her over the balcony to her death. Afterward, he would never think of her again.

But showing her fear would only get her killed more quickly.

Toel had no use for the weak. She had to present him with something else.

“You’ve not invited me,” Annaïg replied.

He shrugged and breathed in mist from the long, curved glass tube he held.

“I’m aware of why you haven’t been here,” he said, frost forming on his nostrils. “Are you?”

“You’re disappointed that I asked you to spare Slyr, after she poisoned me.”

“It goes beyond that. I thought you were like me, driven to excel, to rise. But you hold yourself back, and there isn’t anything I can do about that.”

“Then why am I here?” she asked.

“Because still you intrigue me. You invent marvelous things. I hope to reach you, at last.”

The hairs behind Annaïg’s ears pricked up at the ominous sound of that.

“I do wish to please you, Chef,” she said.

“Do you?”

“Yes. But in my own way.”

“By definition, you can only please me by catering to my desires.”

Annaïg shook her head, tightening her belly to act bold. “That is only the beginning,” she said. “A child’s idea of pleasure.”

“What is a child?” Toel asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied. “My point is that the best chef cooks what the patron never knew he wanted.”

“And what is it that I don’t know I want?”

“That is for me to show you,” Annaïg said, trying to sound playful. “And it cannot be rushed.”

“And yet, I feel impatient,” Toel said, “and perhaps a bit condescended to.”

She forced a smile. "But still I intrigue you."

"I cannot deny it," he said, inhaling again.

He looked off into the distance for a long moment, and then returned his attention to her.

"There will be a banquet," he said, "some days hence. It will be for the court of Umbriel himself. Four kitchens have been invited to present a tasting for Lord Rhel, Umbriel's steward—mine, and those of Phmer, Luuniel, and Ashdre. Whichever kitchen pleases the steward most will cook for Umbriel. I need not tell you that it must be my kitchen that wins."

"It goes without saying, Chef."

"Phmer is our chief competition, to my mind. She is known for her creativity. Before Phmer, there were only eight essential savors: salty, bitter, piquant, sweet, sour, ephemerate, quick, and dead. But Phmer found a ninth sensation of taste, which has no name, and all attempts to duplicate it or ascertain how it is created have failed. And so, Annaïg, although you may tantalize me with these desires you know I have which I myself do not, this is what I tell you now: You will find this ninth savor for me. If you do not, any other plans you have to gratify me are moot. Do you understand?"

"I do, Chef," Annaïg said. "I won't fail."

"Indeed," he replied. She couldn't tell if it was an affirmation or a question. "Now you may go."

"A few questions, Chef," she said.

"What are they?"

"Do you have a sample of this ninth taste, so that I might know what I'm trying to duplicate?"

"I don't have any, no."

"Have you ever tasted it yourself, Chef?"

For a moment his face might have been cast in stone.

"No," he finally said.

"Can you at least tell me if it is a spiritual or gross substance?"

“We may assume spiritual, as only the highest lords have tasted it.”

“Thank you, Chef.”

Her knees were shaking when she left, and she felt profoundly unreal, as if she were watching this all happen to someone else. She returned to the kitchens, attempting to stay calm, to focus—trying to understand where she had to start.

She was sure she could duplicate anything she could taste, but that wasn't in the offering. That left her with what seemed an impossible task, but it was pointless to entertain that notion, wasn't it? She had to assume that it was possible. Phmer had done it, after all. Had it been an accident, or a design?

She went to her private bench, far from the hustle and bustle of the stations, and began idly thumbing through the various powders, liquids, distillations, and ferments in her cabinet. She fiddled with the flow of soul force through the refraxor, but after an hour of that pushed back and placed her face in her palms. Her brain didn't seem to work at all. Sighing, she went back to her room, but her thoughts flowed no better there, so in the end she gave up and opened a bottle of wine.

She was on her second glass when Slyn entered.

“I'm sorry,” the other woman said. “You're never here this early in the day. I—”

“No, join me,” Annaïg said. “I'm just thinking.”

“Well, I've no wish to disturb you.”

“Sometimes talking helps me think.” She pulled over a second cup and poured more wine. “Have a drink, talk.”

Slyn looked uncertain but did as she was told.

“What do you know of Phmer's ninth savor?” Annaïg asked.

“I've heard of it,” Slyn said cautiously.

“Before I came to Umbriel, I knew of only four or five essen-

tial flavors. When I was taught to cook, I was told that the success of a good dish was in the inclusion and balancing of these sensations. When I came here, you, Slyn, taught me that there were three more, all of a spiritual nature.”

“Quick, dead, and ephemerate,” Slyn supplied.

“So I’m thinking,” Annaïg said. “I taste the five gross senses on different parts of my tongue, and I read long ago that the tongue is grown to interpret such flavors. But I cannot, like the lords, taste the difference between quick and dead. I might discern that a wiggling shrimp is alive and a still one dead, but the taste is the same, because my tongue isn’t designed for that distinction. And as for ephemerate, that’s another thing entirely, isn’t it? Those are the ‘flavors’ we make with souls. The tongue doesn’t taste them, although that’s generally how they are introduced, since they’re presented as food. But really, the skin or eyes can taste them equally as well—and ephemerate isn’t a single kind of flavor, but hundreds, thousands, of very different things made possible by the cuisine spirituelle. Like the terror you tasted the other day, or the joy I could create tomorrow. How does that compare with the electric vitality of raw, unrefined soul energy, or the needling pleasure of filple?”

Slyn took a drink. “So you’re thinking that the ninth savor can’t be ephemerate, then? That it must be a new material flavor?”

“Or something completely different, as different from the ephemerate as the ephemerate is from salty and piquant.”

“How can such a thing be discovered, then? If one knew only piquant, sour, and sweet, how would you guess that salty existed and learn how to make it?”

Something shaped itself in her mind then, a worm that might become an idea.

“Especially if one had no tongue,” Annaïg pursued, her thoughts racing. “That is our dilemma.”

“Our?”

“You are still my assistant, Slyn.”

“I know that,” she said. “I only thought—”

“I’m giving you another chance,” Annaïg said. “One more, do you understand?”

Slyn nodded vigorously, and then her eyes narrowed.

“You’ve thought of something, haven’t you?”

Annaïg smiled. “It’s not what you think.”

“What, then?”

“I think I might be able to hit twice with the same stone,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Toel believes that I am not ambitious enough, that I’m not willing to do what I have to do to survive and get ahead.”

“Yes,” Slyn said. “I’ve heard him say so.”

“I’ll get the ninth savor,” Annaïg promised. “And I’ll show Toel just how far I’m willing to go.”

“How?”

“I’m going to steal it from Phmer.”

Slyn’s eyes widened and her mouth parted.

“That’s impossible,” she said.

“Look,” Annaïg said, drinking a bit more wine. “We can work for two weeks to invent this thing—and probably fail—or we can go where we know it already exists, and spend that time learning how best to use it to please Umbriel.” She sat back. “I think it’s what Toel intends me to do. I think this is a test he has devised.”

“That does sound like him,” Slyn admitted. “But to invade another kitchen, to pass all their safeguards and survive, much less escape being caught—I can’t imagine how it could be done.”

“I can,” Annaïg told her. “I know how to learn secret ways, and I know recipes for concealment that—with a bit of work—ought to keep me undiscovered.”

"I'm not sure you understand," Slyn said. "Even if you escape—if Phmer finds any evidence that you stole from her, she can demand Toel give you to her, and he must do so. That is the law. Perhaps that is even what Toel has in mind for you."

"Then I had better not be caught," Annaïg said. "Or leave trace of my visit."

Slyn's face hardened into an expression of determination.

"Tell me what I can do to help," she said. "I will not fail you."

"You had better not," Annaïg said. "This really is your last chance. You must understand that."

"I understand," Slyn replied.

"Good. I'll let you know when I need something."

Glim unfolded the note from Annaïg the skraw Jernle had handed him. It was written in the jumble language of their childhood—which only the two of them understood—although Glim hadn't seen any evidence that anyone on Umbriel could read in any language. Still—avoiding leeches was better than picking them off.

What are you up to, Nn? he thought. For a moment he considered refusing the request until Annaïg agreed to make something to replace the vapors. He followed her logic, understood why she couldn't do it, but still, something about her refusal bothered him. Maybe it was because she didn't take him seriously, that she thought her cause was bigger than his. And it was, wasn't it? How many of his people—his relatives—had died because of Umbriel?

But the skraws weren't to blame for that. They didn't even know it had happened.

But someone was responsible.

He turned to Wert, who was watching him patiently.

"I need detailed information concerning the kitchen of Phmer," he said. "Bribe the pantry workers, if you must."

"More maps?" Wert inquired.

"No. More than that." He paused. "And let's see what happens if some of the middens stop draining. That should get someone's attention."

Wert's face broke into a huge grin. "At last!" he said. "Which ones?"

"You decide," Glim said. "I need to have a second look at something."

Everything led to the sump, which meant lots of things led away from it as well. Early on Glim had found his way to the trees of the Fringe Gyre.

The flying island of Umbriel was a rough cone, with the apex pointed down. The sump was a basin in that cone, and most of the population of the city lived in warrens in the stone. The lords lived on the upper edge in their delicate habitations of metal and crystal. But another world sprouted from the verge of the rim, enormous trees whose roots sank deep into the rock where vesicles from the sump fed and watered them, and whose boughs and branches flowed far out from the island like a sort of lacy collar, bending in a rightwise whorl. It was a world of strange birds and weird gardens growing from intentionally rotted places in the wood, of fruits and nuts and warbling monkeylike things.

Next to the sump, he liked this place most, and sometimes better. Part of it was the feeling of freedom the place afforded, but part of it was a familiarity that spoke to him almost below the level of consciousness, a sense of intrinsic belonging he'd lost months ago.

The view, however, was disturbing. If he looked to the hori-

zons, he saw plains and forest, softened and made beautiful by distance. If he looked down, however, that was another story. Any open ground revealed the thousands of corpses walking, animated by Umbriel's larvae.

The ground was very open now. Umbriel had changed direction, taking them east over vast mountains, and below them was heath and snow, and few trees to hide the undying. They seemed numberless, and—perhaps worst of all—organized, marching in a rough semblance of ranks.

"I haven't seen you lately," a pleasant feminine voice quietly said.

He glanced up but already knew who it was.

"Hello, Fhena," he said.

With her charcoal complexion and red eyes, Fhena might have been a Dunmer woman of about twenty years. But she was no more Dunmer than Wert was human, and since Umbrielians were born adult, he'd reckoned from their earlier conversations she was probably no more than five or six years old. She wore her usual blouse and knee-shorts; today the former was green and the latter yellow.

"Did you bring me more orchid shrimp?" she asked hopefully.

"No," he said, "but I thought you might like these."

He handed her a pouch, which she took with an expression of purest delight. But when she saw what was inside, her look wandered toward puzzlement.

"Kraken barnacles," he explained.

She pulled one out of the bag. It was about the size and shape of a large shark tooth, smooth and dark green, with a wet, tube-like appendage sticking out of the wide end.

She bit the tooth-shaped shell.

"Hard," she said.

"Here," he said. "Let me show you."

He took the barnacle, gave it a squeeze so the shell cracked, then pulled out the soft mass inside by the projecting stalk. He handed it to Fhena, who bit into it, chewed a moment, and then laughed.

"Good, yes?" Glim said. "Those are native to the seas around Lilmoth, where I grew up. The taskers must have collected some and brought them up, because they've suddenly started growing in the sump."

"Delicious," she agreed. "You always find some way to surprise me."

"I'm glad to be of service," Mere-Glim said.

"But I'm not often able to repay the favor," she replied.

"You might today," he said. "Tell me about the trees."

"The trees?"

"Yes." He tapped on the nearest branch.

"I'm not sure what to say about them," she replied.

"Well," he said, trying to think how to go about this, "I've noticed that they produce nuts and fruit and even grains, of a sort. But what else?"

"What else?" She clapped her hands. "Salt and sugar, acid and wine, vinegar and sulfur, iron and glass. The trees have a talent for making things—they just have to be told how."

"Who tells them?"

She looked thoughtful. "Well, I'm not sure," she said. "They've been making most things for so long, I think they may have forgotten. Or at least they don't talk about it. They just tell us when something needs doing, or collecting, or when something isn't right and them in the kitchens must help."

"Wait a minute," Glim said. "The trees talk to you?"

"Of course. Can't you hear them?"

"Almost," Glim said. "Almost. But what does it mean?"

Her eyes had widened, and he realized his spines were puffed out and he was giving off his fighting odor. He tried to calm himself.

“What’s this about, Glim?” she asked.

“It’s about me,” he said. “It’s about my people, and why they died.”

“I don’t understand,” she said. “But I can see how upset you are. Can you explain?”

Glim thought about that for a long moment. Annaïg would tell him not to trust the girl; she didn’t trust anyone on Umbriel. But Fhena had only ever helped him.

“I would like to explain,” he finally said. “Because it might mean something to you. It might make you think of something. So don’t be afraid to interrupt me.”

“I won’t,” she replied.

“I’ve told you before; I’m from a place named Black Marsh. My people call themselves the Saxhleel, and others call us Argonians.”

“I remember. And you said all of your people are the same.”

“The same? Yes, compared to your people. We all have scales, and breathe beneath the water, that sort of thing. Umbriel chooses your form when you are born. Mine is chosen by—ah—heritage.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not important right now. We can talk about that later. What’s important is this; there is another race in Black Marsh—the Hist. They are sentient trees, and we are—connected to them. They are many and they are one, all attached at the root, and we, too, are joined to that root. Some say we were created by the Hist, to see for them the world where they cannot walk. They can call us or send us away. When we are named, we take of the sap of the Hist, and we are changed—sometimes a little, sometimes very much.”

“What do you mean, ‘changed’?”

“A few twelves of years ago, our country was invaded from Oblivion. The Hist knew it was going to happen, and called our people back to Black Marsh. Many of us were altered, made ready for the war that we had to fight. Made stronger, faster—able to endure terrible things.”

“I’m starting to understand,” Fhena said. “You’re saying the Hist are much like the trees of our gyre.”

“Yes. But not the same. They don’t speak to me as the Hist did. But you say they speak to you.”

“Not in words,” she replied. “They dream, they experience, they communicate needs. I can’t imagine them making a plan, as you describe.”

“But their sap can alter things, like that of the Hist.”

“Oh, yes. But as I said, usually they have to be told.” She put her hand on his shoulder. “I still don’t understand why this is so upsetting to you.”

“The Hist are supposed to be unified,” Glim said, “but at times certain trees have gone rogue, broken away from the others. It happened long, long ago in my city, and I think it happened again, not long before your world entered mine. A rogue tree helped Umbriel somehow, do you understand? It helped kill many, many of my people so they could serve Umbriel as dead things. And now I think it may have helped summon Umbriel here in the first place. Can you remember—”

But Fhena’s eyes had become unfocused with memory. He stopped and waited.

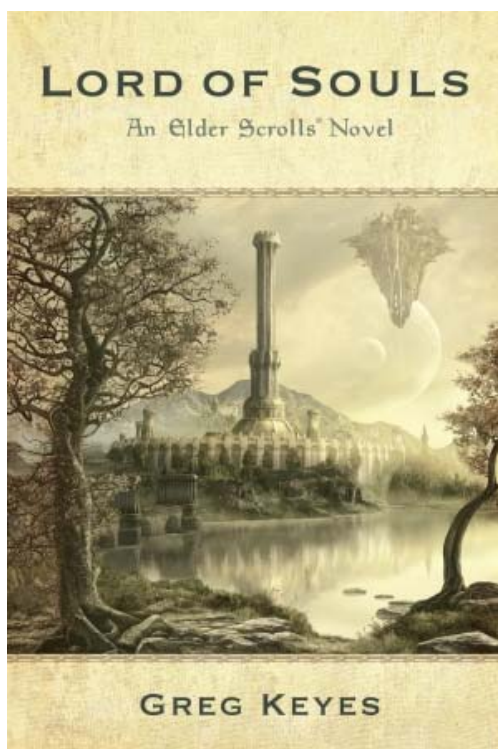
“We were in the void,” she said. “Nothing around. And then the trees began to sing a strange song, one I had never heard before. They sang and sang. It was beautiful. No one could remember such a thing happening before. And then we were here. They still sing it, but quietly now. Listen.”

She took his hand and pressed it to the bark. It was strange,

the roughness of the tree and the supple warmth of her hand, and for a moment that was all he experienced. But then she began to hum, and something seemed to turn in his head, and the soft burring that was all he had ever heard from the Fringe Gyre before suddenly sharpened and he heard it in tune with Fhena's humming, a faint, rising and falling tone, along with a thousand harmonics, as if each seed and leaf had its own note to add. And he knew that melody, had known it since before his birth. The Hist sang it.

But the Fringe version was a little different—simpler. Still, it drew him, pulling him out of language and thought, and for a long, long time he knelt there with Fhena's hand on his, feeling newborn, empty, at one.

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