**TWO**

Heat woke her, suffocating heat wrapped around her body, burned into her lungs. She gasped

and flailed; the air seemed incredibly heavy and murky. She wrapped her arms around

herself, feeling only slick, wet skin.

She heard a whimper and then a strangled shriek. She made out a silhouette a few feet from

her, revealed in the dim illumination from four fuzzy-looking globes of a dark amber color,

one in each direction, all above her.

“Slyr?”

“Yes,” the frantic voice answered. “What‟s happening? We‟re being burned alive!”

Annaпg swung her feet down and found the floor, wincing at the heat of the stone against

her soles. The air hurt to move through, too, especially when she found the vent in the floor it

was coming out of. She jumped back with a shriek.

“It‟s steam,” she said.

“Why? What are they doing to us?”

Annaпg recalled the battle, and Toel‟s blue eyes. Then he had touched her lips. That was all

she remembered.

She found a wall and began working down it and soon discovered a seam that might be a

door.

Slyr had joined her in exploring now, panting hoarsely.

“I don‟t know what‟s going on,” Annaïg said. “But I … I think this isn‟t meant to kill us.

It‟s hot, but not that hot. And I don‟t think it‟s getting worse.”

“Right,” Slyr said. “You must be right. Why would he go through the trouble of capturing

us only to kill us? He wouldn‟t do that, would he?” She sounded as if she were trying to

convince herself.

“I don‟t know Toel,” Annaïg said. “I don‟t know anything about him.”

“Why do you think I do?” Slyr snapped.

There was something strange about her tone.

“I didn‟t say you did,” Annaïg replied.

Slyr was silent for a moment.

“Well, I do know a bit,” she finally offered. “He—” She stopped, then laughed softly. She

folded back down on her bench.

“What?”

“I think they‟re cleaning us,” she replied. “I‟ve heard they use steam to draw the impurities

from the body.”

“I‟ve heard of that,” Annaïg remembered. “In Skyrim they do it, and it‟s come and gone as

a fashion in Cyrodiil. Black Marsh is already a steaming jungle and Argonians don‟t sweat,

so it never caught on there.”

Her breathing slowed as panic faded. Now that the surprise and fear were gone, the

pervasive heat actually felt pretty nice.

“What else do you know about Toel?”

“Everyone has heard of Toel,” Slyr said. “Most master chefs of the higher kitchens are

born to it, but Toel started down with us. When he wants something, he will do whatever is

necessary to get it.”

“Clearly,” Annaïg replied.

“More than you know. Qijne and her kitchen served three lords. Toel serves a much greater

one, but that is still a dangerous thing. Bargains must have been struck, and probably a few

assassinations accomplished.”

“A few?”

“Other than the rest of our kitchen, I mean.”

“They‟re all dead, aren‟t they?”

“I didn‟t see anyone moving.”

Annaпg was starting to feel a little dizzy. It wasn‟t getting any hotter, but the heat was

beginning to sit more heavily on her.

“I‟m sorry,” she said. “I didn‟t know many of them very well, but you …”

“I hated most of them,” Slyr said. “And I was indifferent to most of the rest.”

“But you saved my life. Qijne was trying to kill me.”

“You‟re—ah—different,” Slyr said.

“Well—thank you.”

Slyr crossed her arms. “Besides, he came for you. If you were dead, what use would I be to

him?”

“Don‟t sell yourself short.”

“I don‟t,” Slyr said softly.

An awkward pause followed.

“I hope they let us out of here soon,” Annaïg ventured, to try to lighten things.

“Yes.”

But it was too hot to talk after that. Annaпg sat with her head on her knees, closed her eyes

and pretended she was on the levee at Yor-Tiq, back in Black Marsh, lazing in the sun while

Glim went diving for trogfish. It was a difficult fantasy to maintain; images of the slaughter

kept coming back to her, especially Qijne‟s dying gaze.

Remembering that, she felt at her wrist. It was still there, the torus. They hadn‟t noticed it

when they took her clothes. If she could figure out how to use it, she would at least have one

small advantage.

She squeezed it, tried to *think* the blade out, but nothing worked, and the heat made her so

tired she finally stopped trying.

Just as she thought she couldn‟t take any more, light came flooding through what she had

earlier guessed was a door, and behind it the sweet kiss of cool air.

“Out, and into the pool with you,” a voice said. Annaïg hesitated, embarrassed at her lack

of clothing but anxious to get out of the heat. She saw the mentioned pool ahead. It looked

cool, lovely.

Slyr was already on her way, so she followed. To her surprise, she didn‟t see anyone,

although the voice had sounded near.

The water was so shockingly cold that for an instant she thought she might lose

consciousness. Her yelp literally got closed in her throat.

“Kaoc‟!” she finally managed.

“Sumpslurry!” Slyr gasped.

Their gazes met, held for an instant—and then together they began laughing. It just

exploded out of Annaпg, as if it had been bottled and pent up for a thousand years. The

feeling wasn‟t happiness; it was more like being crazy.

But it was a lot better than crying.

“You should have seen your expression,” Slyr giggled when she finally got control of

herself.

“I‟m sure it was no more ridiculous than yours,” she replied.

“Lords, this is cold.”

Annaпg took in the new chamber then; it had low ceilings of cloth woven in complicated,

curvilinear patterns of gold, hyacinth, lime, and sanguine. It draped down the walls, giving

the appearance that they were in a large, very oddly shaped tent. Globes like those in the

sweat-room, but brighter, depended here and there, filling the chamber with a pleasant golden

light. On the near wall, two golden robes hung.

“I hope those are ours,” she said.

“Not yet they aren‟t,” the voice from earlier said. “Back in the heat with you.”

This time her gaze found the speaker—a froglike creature about two feet high, mottled

orange, yellow, and green. It was crouched above the doorway.

“We have to go back in there?” Annaïg said.

“You‟re both extremely polluted,” the thing said. “This could take a while. But at least you

seem to be enjoying it.”

She wasn‟t enjoying it an hour later, when the alternating heat and cold had rendered all the

strength out of her. She was also starving. But finally the frog-thing gave a little nod and sent

them across the room to the robes.

The fabric was like nothing she had ever touched before, utterly smooth, almost like a

liquid. She thought she had never felt anything better.

“Come along,” the creature said, hopping down from its perch and landing, to stand on its

hind limbs. It waddled off, through a slit in the cloth that draped the walls and into a smooth,

polished corridor.

After a few turns he led them into a room appointed much as the pool-room had been,

except the drapery was of more muted, autumn shades. Her heart struck up a bit when she

saw a small, low table set with a pitcher of some sort of liquid and bowls of fruits, fern

fronds, and small condiment bowls.

“Eat,” the creature said. “Rest. Be ready to speak with Lord Toel.”

Annaïg didn‟t have to be told twice.

The pitcher contained an effervescent beverage that had almost no taste, but reminded her

of honeysuckle and plum, though it wasn‟t sweet. The fruits were all unknown to her: a small

orange berry with a tough rind but sweet, lemony pulp inside; a black, lozenge-shaped thing

with no skin that was a bit chewy and was a lot like soft cheese; tiny berries no larger than the

head of a needle, but clustered in the thousands, which exploded into vapor on touching her

tongue. The ferns were the least pleasant, but the various jellies in the small bowls clung

viscously to them, and those were delightfully strange.

She couldn‟t taste alcohol in the drink, but by the time she felt sated, things were getting

pleasantly spinny.

“This is nice,” Annaïg said, looking around. There were two beds, also on the floor. “Do

you think this is our room? One room just for the two of us?”

“Like our little hideaway in Qijne‟s kitchen.”

“But bigger. And with beds. And—ah—interesting food.”

Slyr closed her eyes. “I‟ve dreamed of this,” she said. “I knew it would be better.”

“Congratulations,” Annaïg said.

Slyr shook her head. “It‟s because of you. These things you come up with … when Toel

figures that out, I‟ll be out of his kitchen, just as your lizard-friend was out of Qijne‟s.”

“That won‟t happen,” Annaïg said. “Without you, I wouldn‟t have known where to start,

and now I don‟t know where to start again. I need you.”

“Toel will have cooks of more use to you.”

“He won‟t,” Annaïg said. “It‟s both of us or neither.”

Slyr shook her head. “You‟re a strange one,” she said. “But I—” She put her head down.

“What?”

“I said I didn‟t care about anyone in Qijne‟s kitchen. But if you had died, I think I might be

sad.”

Annaïg smiled. “Thanks,” she said.

“Okay,” Slyr said, rising unsteadily. “Do you care which bed?”

“No. You choose.”

Annaпg soon found her own bed. Like the robe, it was a delight, especially after weeks of

hard pallets and stone floor.

She was dropping off to sleep, feeling content for the moment, at least in a creature sort of

way.

She thought maybe she should open her locket, contact Attrebus, let him know how things

had changed.

But then it struck her: Her amulet was gone.

Even with worry as her bedmate, when she woke the next morning she was more rested and

felt better than she had in a long time, even before coming to Umbriel. Slyr was still dead to

the world, but the frog-creature had returned and was waiting patiently near the table.

“You‟ll break your fast with Lord Toel,” he said.

“Let me wake Slyr,” she said.

“Not her,” it said. “Only you.”

Slyr‟s fears from the night before were still fresh in her mind. “I‟d rather—” She began.

“You‟d rather not protest Lord Toel‟s wishes,” the thing interrupted.

She nodded, reminding herself that she had a greater mission. Besides, she could never put

in a good word for the other woman if she never got to talk to Toel.

“What‟s your name?” she asked the creature.

“Dulgiijbiddiggungudingu,” it sputtered. “Gluuip.”

She starred at the froth the name had formed on the creature‟s mouth.

“Dulbig—” she started.

“Dulg will do,” he added.

“Lead the way, Dulg.”

“You don‟t imagine you‟re going in that?” Dulg asked. He gestured toward a curtained

area.

She followed his gesture, and in the enclosure discovered a gold and black gown. Like

everything else here, it might have been spun of spider silk, or something far finer.

She never wore things like this. It clung embarrassingly to her contours and was uselessly

ornamented with fine beaded webs at the cuffs and collars. She felt clunky and far more out

of her element than she had in Qijne‟s fire pits. Although her father held a noble title in High

Rock that had once had currency in Black Marsh, since before she was born there had been

no balls, no cotillions, no evenings at the theater. All of that—and the frippery that went with

it—was swept away when the Argonians retook control of their land.

And good riddance to that, at least. Or so she had always thought.

But she felt herself wondering if Attrebus would think she looked passable in this outfit.

“Come, come,” Dulg called impatiently. “Your hair and face must be tended to.”

An hour later, after the services of a silent, slight, blondish man, Dulg finally led her

through a suite of richly furnished rooms and into a chamber with fresh air pouring through a

large door and beyond …

Toel was there, but she could not make her gaze focus on him. There was too much else to

wonder at.

She was outside, and Umbriel rose and fell all around her.

She stood on an outjut in a cliff face that was steep but not vertical, and that looked out on

a vast, conical basin. Below her spread an emerald green lake and, above, the city grew from

the stone itself, twisting spires and latticed buildings that might have been built with colored

wire, whole castles hanging like bird cages from immensely thick cables. Higher still, the

rocky rim of the island supported gossamer towers in every hue imaginable, and what

appeared to be an enormous spiderweb of spun glass that broke the sunlight into hundreds of

tiny rainbows.

“You like my little window?” Toel asked.

She stiffened, afraid to say anything for fear it might be the wrong thing, but just as fearful

of saying nothing.

“It‟s beautiful,” she said. “I didn‟t know.”

“Didn‟t know that anything in Umbriel could be beautiful, you mean?”

She opened her mouth to try and correct her mistake, but he shook his head.

“How could you, laboring down in the pits? How could you have imagined this?”

She nodded.

“Do you fear me, child?” he asked.

“I do,” she admitted.

He smiled slightly at that, and then walked closer to the rail, putting his back to her. If she

were quick and strong, she might send him toppling over.

But of course he knew that. She could tell by the easy confidence with which he moved.

He knew she couldn‟t—or wouldn‟t—do any such thing.

“Do you like your quarters?” he asked.

“Very much,” she replied. “You are very generous.”

“I‟ve elevated you,” he said. “Things are better here. I think you will find your work more

enjoyable, more stimulating.”

He turned and walked to a small table furnished with two chairs.

“Sit,” he said. “Join me.”

She complied, and a slight man in a vest with many buttons brought them a drink that

hissed and fizzed and was mostly vapor. It tasted like mint, sage, and orange peel and was

nearly intolerably cold.

“Now,” Toel said. “Tell me about this place you are from.”

“Lord?”

“What is it like, how was your life there? What did you do? That sort of thing.”

She wondered at first why she felt so surprised, but then it occurred to her that no one—not

even Slyr—had ever asked her about her life before coming to Umbriel—not unless it

concerned her knowledge of plants and minerals.

“There‟s not much left of it, I think,” she said.

“No, I imagine not. And yet some of it lives in you yet, yes? And in Umbriel.”

“You mean because their souls were consumed here?”

“Not merely consumed,” he replied. “Mostly, yes, Umbriel must use living energy to

remain aloft and functioning. But some of it is cycled, transformed, reborn—it‟s not all lost.

Take solace in that, if you can. If you cannot, it‟s no matter to me, really, but a waste of your

time and energy.”

“You think grieving a waste?”

“What else could it be? Anger, fear, ecstasy—these states of mind might produce

something useful. Grief and regret produce nothing except bad poetry, which is actually

worse than nothing. Now. Speak of what I asked you.”

She closed her eyes, trying to decide where to start, what to say. She didn‟t want to tell him

anything that might help Umbriel and its masters.

“My home was in a city called Lilmoth,” she said. “In the Kingdom of Black Marsh. I

lived with my father. He was—”

Toel held up a finger. “Pardon me,” he said. “What is a father?”

“Maybe I used the wrong word,” she said. “I‟m still learning this dialect.”

“Yes. I know of no such word.”

“My father is the man who sired me.”

Again the blank stare.

She shifted and held her hand up, palms facing each other.

“Ah, a man and woman, they, ahh … procreate—”

“Yes,” Toel said. “That can be very entertaining.”

She felt her face warm and nodded.

“You think so, too, I see. Very interesting. So a father is the man you used to procreate

with?”

“No. Oh, no. That would be—no. I mean I‟ve never—” She shook her head and started

again. “A man and woman—my father and mother—they procreated and had me.”

“„Had you‟?”

“I was born to them.”

“You‟re not making sense, dear.”

“After they procreated, I was conceived, and I grew in my mother until I was born.”

He sat back, and for the first time she saw his eyes flash with real astonishment. It looked

very strange on him, as if he had never been surprised at anything.

“Do you mean to say that you were inside of a woman? And came out of her?”

“Yes.”

“Like a parasite—like a Zilh worm or chest borer?”

“No, it‟s normal, it‟s—weren‟t you …?”

“That‟s revolting!” he said, and laughed. “Absolutely revolting. Did you eat her corpse

after you came out?”

“Well, it didn‟t kill her.”

“How big were you?”

She shaped her hands to indicate the size of a newborn.

“Well, I have to say, this is already one of the most interesting—and disturbing—

conversations I‟ve ever had.”

“Then you people aren‟t born?”

“Of course we are. Properly, from the Marrow Sump.”

“So when you use the word „procreate‟—”

“It simply means sex. Copulation. It has no other sense, that I know of.”

Annaпg suddenly felt the world rearranging itself around her. She had been assuming that

all the talk about coming from the sump and returning to it was a metaphor, a way of talking

about life and death.

But Toel wasn‟t kidding, she was sure of that.

“Please, go on. Tell me more such disgusting things.”

And so they talked on. After his initial outburst, however, he did not interrupt her much; he

listened, with only the occasional question, usually concerning terms he didn‟t know. She

talked mostly about her life in Black Marsh, about history, about the secession of Black

Marsh from the Empire and the subsequent collapse of the Empire. She did not say anything

about the revival of the Empire, about the Emperor or Attrebus—but it was a challenge,

because the way he listened, the way he hung on her every word, made her want to keep

talking, to not let it stop, to keep that attention on her forever.

When she finally forced herself to stop, he steepled his fingers under his lip. Then he

nodded out at his world.

“You speak of vast forests and deserts, of countries whose size almost surpasses my

imagination. I have never walked such lands—I never will. This, Umbriel, is the only world I

can ever know. This, Umbriel, is your home now, and the only place you will ever know

again. The sooner you understand that, the better. Waste no time on what you have lost, for

you will never have it again.”

“But my world is all around you,” she said. “I could take you there, show it to you …”

He shook his head. “It is not so simple. The outside of Umbriel, in a sense, is in your

world. But here, where you find yourself now—surely you observed the larvae, saw how they

lose corporeal form when they move fully into your plane. The same would be true of me,

were I to leave. My body would dissolve, and Umbriel would reclaim the stuff of my soul.

There is no leaving for me. Or you.”

“But I am not from Umbriel,” she said. “I am not a part of it.”

“Not yet,” Toel said. “But in time you will be as much a part of Umbriel as I am.”