**EIGHT**

“This isn‟t a kitchen,” Annaïg whispered to Glim. “This is …”

But she had no word for it.

Her first impression was of a forge, or furnace, because enormous rectangular pits of

almost white-hot stone lined up down the center of a vast chamber carved and polished from

the living rock. Above the pits innumerable metal grates, boxes, cages, and baskets depended

from chains, and vast sooty hoods sucked most of the heat and fumes up higher still into

Umbriel. Left and right, red maws gaped from the walls—ovens, obviously, but really more

like furnaces. Between them, beings strange and familiar crowded and hurried about long

counters and cabinets, wielding knives, cleavers, pots, pans, saws, awls, and hundreds of

unidentifiable implements.

Though the smells here were generally cleaner than those of the Midden, they were just as

varied, and decidedly more alien.

So was the staff; many of them resembled the peoples she knew—there were in particular

many who looked like mer; there were others for which—like the place itself—she had no

name. She saw thick figures with brick-red skin, fierce faces, and small horns on their heads,

working next to ghostly pale blue-haired beings, spherical mouselike creatures with stripes,

and a veritable horde of monkeylike creatures with goblinesque faces. These last scrambled

along the shelves and cabinets, tossing bottles and tins from shelves in the stone that rose

sixty feet along the walls, although in most of the room the ceiling crushed down almost to

the level of the tallest head.

But Qijne led her through all of this, past searing chunks of meat, huge snakelike creatures

battering against the bars of their cages as the heat killed them, cauldrons that smelled of leek

and licorice, boiling blood, molasses.

After a hundred paces the cooking pits were replaced by tables crowded with more delicate

equipment of glass and bright metal. Some were clearly made for distillation, this made

obvious by the coils that rose above; others resembled retorts, parsers, and fermentation vats.

Along the walls were what amounted to vaster versions of these things, distilling, parsing,

and fermenting tons of material.

It was breathtaking, and for a moment Annaïg forgot her situation in wonder of it.

But then something caught her eye that brought it all back: a cable, the thickest she had

seen yet, pulsing with the pearly light of soul stuff and, more specifically, the life force of the

people of Lil-moth. It passed through various glass collars filled with liquid and colored

gases, and insectile filaments and extremely fine tubing coiled and wound into what might be

condensation chambers.

She felt tears forming, and trembled with the effort to keep them back.

For the first time since entering the kitchens, Qijne spoke.

“You like my kitchen,” she said. “I see it.”

Her throat caught, but then breath came, and something seemed to rise up through her,

inflating her. She focused her gaze on Qijne‟s eyes.

“It‟s amazing,” she admitted. “I don‟t understand most of it.”

“You really know nothing of Umbriel, do you?”

“Only that it is murdering people.”

“Murdering? That‟s a strange word.”

“It‟s the right word. Why? Why is Umbriel doing this?”

“What a meaningless question,” Qijne said. “And how unknowable.” She took Annaïg‟s

chin between thumb and forefinger. “I‟ll let you know what questions are worth asking, little

thing. Give me all the attention and love you possess, and you will thrive here. Otherwise, it‟s

the sump. Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. My kitchen.” She opened her arms as if to take it all in. “There are many

appetites in Umbriel. Some are coarse—meat and tubers, offal and grain. Other habitants

have more spiritual appetites, subsisting on distilled essences, pure elements, tenebrous

vapors. The loftiest of our lords require the most refined cuisine, that which has as its basis

the very stuff of souls. And above all, they crave novelty. And that, my dear, is where you

come in.”

“So that‟s why you want me? To help you invent new dishes?”

“There are many sorts of dishes, dear. Umbriel needs more than raw energy to run. The

sump needs tending; the Fringe Gyre needs feeding. Raw materials must be found or created.

Poisons, balms, salves, entertainments, are all in great demand. Drugs to numb, to please, to

bring fantastic visions. All of these things and more are done in the kitchens. And we must

stay ahead of others, you see? Stay in favor. And that means new, better, more powerful,

deadlier, more interesting.”

Annaïg nodded. “And you believe I can help you.”

“We‟ve just passed through a void; we were nearing the end of our resources. Now this

whole pantry is open to us, and you know more about it than I do. I can admit that, you see?

In the end you have more to learn from me than I from you, but at this moment you are my

teacher. And you will help me make my kitchen the strongest.”

“What‟s to stop the other kitchens from kidnapping their own help?”

She shook her head. “Most of us cannot go far from Umbriel without losing our corpus.

There are certain, specialized servants we use to collect things from below.”

“The walking dead, you mean?”

“Yes, the larvae. Once incorporated, they can be brought here with certain incantations,

bearing raw materials, beasts, what have you. But intelligent beings with desirable souls—”

“Are all already dead by the time your gatherers begin their work.”

“Did you interrupt me? I‟m sure you didn‟t.”

“I‟m sorry.”

“I‟m sorry, *Chef.”*

“I‟m sorry, Chef.”

Qijne nodded. “Yes, that‟s how it is. And those of us in the kitchens don‟t have the power

to send them farther, or the incantations to bring them back here. Once the gatherers move

very far from Umbriel, contact is lost.”

This is good, Annaïg thought. I‟m learning weaknesses already. Things that will help

Attrebus.

“So here we are,” she said.

Annaïg looked at the table Qijne was indicating. It was littered with leaves, bark, halfeviscerated

animals, roots, stones, and what have you. There was also a ledger, ink, and a

pen.

“I want to know about these things. I want you to list and describe every substance you

know of that might be of use to me, and describe as well how to find them. You will do this

for half of your work period. For the remainder of your shift you will cook—first you will

learn how things are down here, then you will create original things. And they had better be

original, do you understand?”

“I don‟t—it‟s overwhelming, Chef.”

“I will assign you a scamp and a hob and put a chef over you. That is far more than most

that come here are given. Count your fortunes.” She waved at one of her gang, a woman with

the gray skin and red eyes of a Dunmer.

“Slyr. Take charge of this one.”

Slyr lifted her knife. “Yes, Chef.”

Qijne nodded, turned and strode off.

“She‟s right, you know,” Slyr said. “You don‟t know how lucky you are.”

Annaïg nodded, trying to read the other woman‟s tone and expression, but neither told her

anything.

A moment later a yellowish, sharp-toothed biped with long pointy ears walked up.

“This is your scamp,” she said. “We use the scamps for hot work. Fire doesn‟t bother them

very much.”

“Hello,” Annaïg said.

“They take orders,” Slyr said. “They don‟t talk. You don‟t really need it now, so you ought

to send it back to the fires. Your hob—” She snapped her fingers impatiently.

Something dropped through Annaïg‟s peripheral vision and she started and found herself

staring into a pair of large green eyes.

It was one of the monkeylike creatures she‟d seen on entering the kitchen. Closer up, she

saw that, unlike a monkey, it was hairless. It did have long arms and legs, though, and its

fingers were extraordinarily long, thin, and delicate.

“Me!” it squeaked.

“Name him,” Slyr said.

“What?”

“Give him a name to answer to.”

The hob opened his mouth, which was both huge and toothless, so that for an instant it

resembled an infant—and more specifically looked like her cousin Luc when he was a child.

It capered on the table.

“Luc,” she said. “You‟ll be Luc.”

“Luc, me,” it said.

“I‟ll be back to get you when it‟s time to cook,” Slyr said. “This you‟ll do on your own.”

She glanced askance at Glim. “What about him?”

“He knows as much about these things as I do,” Annaïg lied. “I need him.”

“Very well.” And Slyr, too, walked off to some other task.

Annaïg realized that she and Glim were alone with Luc the hob.

“Now what?” Glim asked.

“They want—”

“I didn‟t understand the words, but it‟s pretty clear what they want you to do. But are you

going to do it?”

“I don‟t see I have much choice,” she replied.

“Sure. No one is watching us at the moment. We could escape back to the Midden through

the garbage chute and then …”

“Right,” she said. “And then what?”

“Okay,” he grumbled. “Use some of this stuff to make another bottle of flying stuff. Then

down the chute, back away, gone.”

“I thought we were agreed on this.”

“But you‟ll be helping them, don‟t you see? Helping them destroy our world.”

“Glim, I‟m learning a lot, and quickly. Think about it—this is the perfect place for me. If I

could have asked for a better chance to sabotage Umbriel, I couldn‟t have thought of anything

better. Given a little time, who knows what I can make here?”

“Yes,” he said. “I see that. But what about me?”

“Do as I do. Talk to me now and then as if you‟re telling me something. Write down the

things I tell you to.”

“What about that?” he asked of the hob.

She considered the thing. “Luc,” she said, “fetch me those whitish-green fronds at the far

end of the table.”

“Yes, Luc me,” the hob said, bounding away and back, bearing the leaves.

“This,” Annaïg dictated, “is fennel fern. It soothes the stomach. It‟s used in poultices for

thick-eye …”

She had almost forgotten where she was when Slyr returned, hours later.

“Time to cook,” Slyr said.

Annaïg rubbed her eyes and nodded. She gestured vaguely at some of the nearby

equipment. “I‟m really interested in distilling essences,” she began. “How does this—”

Slyr coughed up an ugly little laugh. “Oh, no, love. You don‟t start there. You start in the

fire.”

“But there isn‟t any fire,” she complained minutes later as she turned the hot metal wheel.

The grill before her rose incrementally.

“More,” Slyr snapped. “This is boar, yes?”

“It smells like it,” Annaïg replied.

“And this goes to the grounds workers in Prixon Palace, and they don‟t like it burnt, like

they do in the Oroy Mansion, see. So higher, and then send your scamp on the walk up there

to swing a cover over it.”

Annaïg kept hauling on the wheel. Sweat was pouring from her now, and she was starting

to feel herself moving past fatigue into some whole new state of being.

“What did you mean, about there being no fire?” Slyr asked.

“There‟s not. It‟s just rocks. Fire is when you burn something. Wood, paper, something.”

Slyr frowned. “Yes, I guess fire can mean that, too—like when grease falls. Right. But why

would we cook by burning wood? If we did, all of the trees in the Fringe Gyre would be gone

in six days.”

“Then what makes the rocks hot?”

“They‟re hot,” Slyr said. “They are, that‟s all. Okay, send your scamp.”

She pointed at the metal hemisphere suspended on a boom from the ceiling, and the scamp

scrambled up into the metal beams and wires above the heat. He pushed the dome—which

ought to have been searing—and positioned it over the smoking hog carcass. Annaïg kept

cranking until the grill came in contact with the dome.

“There,” Slyr said. “We‟re well above the flames. So what else can we put up there? What

do we need to cook slowly?”

“We could braise those red roots.”

“The Helsh? Yes, we could.” She seemed surprised, for a moment, but covered it quickly.

“These little birds—they would cook nicely up there.”

“They would, but those are going to Oroy Mansion—”

“—and they like everything burnt there.”

“Yes.”

Annaïg was sure Slyr almost smiled, but then she was directly back to business.

“So get on with it,” she said.

And so she burned, braised, roasted, and seared things for what felt like days, until at last

Slyr led her to a dark dormitory with about twenty sleeping mats. A table supported a

cauldron, bowls, and spoons. She stood in line, legs shaking with fatigue, helped herself, and

then slid down against the wall near the pallet Slyr indicated was hers.

The stew was hot and pungent, unfamiliar meat and odd, nutty grains, and at the moment it

seemed like the best thing she had ever eaten.

“When you finish that, I advise you to sleep,” Slyr told her. “In six hours you‟re back to

work.”

Annaïg nodded, looking around for Glim.

“They‟ve taken your friend,” Slyr said.

“What? To where?”

“I don‟t know. It was obvious he didn‟t know much about cooking, and there‟s curiosity

about what he is exactly.”

“Well, when will they bring him back?”

Slyr‟s face took on a faintly sympathetic cast. “Never, I should think,” she replied.

She left, and Annaïg curled into a ball and wept quietly. She pulled out her pendant and

opened it.

“Find Attrebus,” she whispered. “Find him.”

Mere-Glim wondered what would happen if he died. It was generally believed that Argonians

had been given their souls by the Hist, and when one died, one‟s soul returned to them, to be

incarnated once more. That seemed reasonable enough, under ordinary circumstances. In the

deepest parts of his dreams or profound thinking were images, scents, tastes that the part of

him that was sentient could not remember experiencing. The concept the Imperials called

“time” did not even have a word in his native language. In fact, the hardest part of learning

the language of the Imperials was that they made their verbs different to indicate when

something happened, as if the most important thing in the world was to establish a linear

sequence of events, as if doing so somehow explained things better than holistic

apprehension.

But to his people—at least the most traditional ones—birth and death were the same

moment. All of life—all of history—was one moment, and only by ignoring most of its

content could one create the illusion of linear progression. The agreement to see things in this

limited way was what other peoples called “time.”

And yet how did this place, this Umbriel, fit into all of that? Because he was cut off from

the Hist. If he died here, where would his soul go? Would it be consumed by the ingenium

Wemreddle had spoken of? And what of his people so consumed? Where they gone forever,

wrenched from the eternal cycle of birth and death? Or was the cycle, the eternal moment,

only the Argonian way of avoiding an even more comprehensive truth?

He decided to stop thinking about it. This sort of thing made his head hurt. Concentrate on

the practical and what he really knew; he knew that he‟d been overpowered by creatures with

massive, crablike arms, snatched away from Annaïg, and brought here. He didn‟t know why.

Fortunately, someone entered the room, rescuing him from any more attempts at reflection.

The newcomer was a small wiry male and might well have been a Nord, with his fine

white hair and ivory, vein-traced skin. And yet there was something about the sqaurish shape

of his head and slump of his shoulders that made him seem somehow quite alien. He wore a

sort of plain olive frock-coat over a black vest and trousers.

He spoke a few words of gibberish. When Glim didn‟t answer, he reached into the pocket

of his coat and withdrew a small glass vial. He pantomimed drinking it and then handed it to

Glim.

Glim took it, wondering how it would feel to kill the man. He surely wouldn‟t get far …

But if they wanted to talk to him, they must want him alive.

He drank the stuff, which tasted like burning orange peel.

The fellow waited for a moment, then cleared his throat. “Can you understand me now?”

“Yes,” Mere-Glim said.

“I‟ll get directly to the point,” the man said. “It has been noticed that you are of an

unknown physical type, or at least one that hasn‟t been seen in my memory, which is quite

long.”

“I‟m an Argonian,” he said.

“A word,” the man said. “Not a word that signifies to me.”

“That is my race.”

“Another word I do not know.” The little man cocked his head. “So it is true, then? You

are from outside? From someplace other than Umbriel?”

“I‟m from here, from Tamriel.”

“Exciting. Another meaningless word. This is Umbriel, and no place else.”

“Your Umbriel is in my world, in my country, Black Marsh.”

“Is it? I daresay it isn‟t. But as interesting as this subject may be to you, it holds little

appeal for me. What I‟m interested in is what you are. What part of Umbriel you will

become.”

“I don‟t understand.”

“You aren‟t the first newcomer here, but you may be the first with that sort of body. But

Umbriel will remember your body, and others with similar corpora will come along in time—

many or a few, depending on what use you are.”

“What if I‟m of no use at all?”

“Then we can‟t permit Umbriel to learn your form. We must cut your body away from

what inhabits it and send it back out into the void.”

“Why not simply let me go? Return me to Tamriel? Why kill me?”

“Ah, a soul is too precious for that. We could not think of letting one waste. Now, tell me

about this form of yours.”

“I am as you see me,” he replied.

“Are you some sort of daedra?”

Glim gaped his mouth. “You know what daedra are?” He asked. “The man we talked to

below didn‟t.”

“Why should he?” the man said. “We have incorporated daedra in the past, but none exist

here now. *Are* you daedra?”

“No.”

“Very well, good, that makes things less complicated. Those spines on your head. What is

their function?”

“They make me handsome, I suppose, to others of my race. More to some than to others. I

try to take care of them.”

“And that membrane between your fingers?”

“For swimming.”

“Swimming?”

“Propelling oneself through water. My toes are webbed as well.”

“You move through water?” The fellow blinked.

“Often.”

“Beneath the surface?”

“Yes.”

“How long can you remain beneath before having to surface for air?”

“Indefinitely. I can breathe water.”

The fellow smiled. “Well, you see, how interesting. What Umbriel lacks, it will seek out.”

Glim shifted on his feet, but since he didn‟t understand what the man was talking about, he

didn‟t answer.

“The sump. Yes, I think you might do well in the sump. But let‟s finish the interview, shall

we? Now, your skin—those are scales, are they not?”