

WIND WEAVER



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It all started with a dish of oysters gone bad. Had my aunt's stomach been stronger, I would never have met my Shadow and my life would have taken a different course. Later, I thought it ironic that my fate should have been decided by rotten shellfish. Ironic, but also rather fitting: from the beginning the whole affair stank like a barrel of fish left in the sun too long.

The oysters were of the succulent type, stewed in Aunt Demetria's favourite wine and parsley sauce. She had a whole plate for her midday meal, and the effects on her delicate constitution were of such violence that she had to take to her bed. On a normal day this would hardly have caused a ripple, for though my aunt might fondly think herself indispensable, I took most of the small decisions that made the household run smoothly. However, it was not a normal day. It was reception day, which meant that we were a noble lady short.

Hesione, my uncle's Shadow, brought me the unwelcome news as I was debating with the housekeeper which amphora of

wine to serve to the visitors. While I considered the rough local vintage good enough, she thought the dignity of a Son of Hipponates, the wind god, demanded something better.

I grimaced at hearing Hesione's tidings, for I knew what that meant. Back in my room she helped me change into the white linen chiton that I kept for the occasion. It might be three centuries out of fashion, but my uncle viewed the long, pleated tunic as the only suitable garment for a Yavanah maiden to wear in public.

"You'd better hurry, Xanthe," Hesione said while draping the trailing cloak that went with the chiton about my shoulders.

It was easy for her. Though she was the most essential member of the household, my uncle did not expect her to play a public role. As a result she still spoke with the dockside accent of her birth, even after thirty years at my uncle's side.

Our sandals slapped against the stone floor when we hurried along the colonnaded gallery of the inner courtyard, but I slowed down upon reaching the audience hall, mindful of the admonition that a lady should glide along in a graceful manner.

The hall stood open to the winds, and a breeze blew between the marble columns that held up the roof. It curled around me, ruffling the hem of my chiton like a playful puppy, and brought with it the smell of sun-baked cobbles and a whiff of sage and rosemary from the gardens. However, I waved it away, for I did not have the time to linger. The first petitioners were about to arrive.

My cousins Althea and Philona were waiting for me, having already appropriated the wine and water jugs. With a sigh I took the jar of old olive oil Althea held out to me. Anointing duty – ah well, I had expected nothing else. We took our position at the top of the steps leading up to the audience hall just as the tramp of feet announced my uncle's arrival.

Accompanied by his eldest son Carpophorus and a group of courtiers, he swept in and took his seat in the gilded chair in front of the statue of Hippotades. Never loath to remind people of his divine ancestor, Uncle Phormio sent a gust of air to billow out the rich blue cloak that graced the statue.

One of the secretaries stepped forward and knocked the end of his staff on the floor. "The Wind Lord declares the audience opened. Let the first petitioner approach." At the same time a couple of servants strewed petals of violets and lilies on the mosaic floor in front of the seat.

It took an effort of will not to roll my eyes; how my uncle liked a display. And I had to admit that he looked an imposing figure with his clothes all hemmed with borders of gold. Yet everybody in the hall knew that real power had long ago slipped through my family's fingers and now resided in the nondescript building down at the harbour that housed the Lion's Voice. No more did foreign kings send gifts of ivory and precious stones or fill the stables behind the palace with exotic animals. The only giraffes left were the ones that cavorted on the murals in the library. And even there the colour was beginning to flake off.

"Xanthe, pay attention." Althea's harsh whisper recalled me to my duties.

Hastily I turned to greet the first visitor. Philona had already given his bare feet a cursory wash and dried them with a cloth of white linen. The man, dressed in a shepherd's cloak of rough homespun, stuttered his thanks, looking embarrassed at the attention. Careful to sweep the folds of my chiton out of the way, I knelt down and dabbed a few drops of oil on his toes.

Once, the ladies of the house would have anointed a visitor's feet from the ankle down, using only the best quality olive oil gained in the first pressing, but there were limits to what I was willing to do for the sake of tradition. After all, those had also been

the days when such a visitor might have been a bold hero, coming home after many years of wandering. Or even one of the gods in disguise, intent on carrying off his host's daughter and seducing her in some flower-filled meadow. I cast a wry glance at Althea, who now presented a cup of wine to the shepherd with the habitual frown on her face. Somehow I doubted that any of us stood in much danger of catching a god's roving eye.

The shepherd approached my uncle, giving an awkward bow, and I let my mind wander again. It was always the same, anyway. Requests for rain clouds to be herded against the hills to shed their burden, storms to be diverted from the islands, forecasts of the weather to come.

Uncle Phormio's house stood on a hill, affording me an unobstructed view of Eolia's harbour. While it was too early in the year for galleys, a few sails dotted the deep blue of the sea. I extended my awareness outward; as often in the afternoon, a landward breeze was blowing. That moment a gust of wind tugged at my clothes. I frowned. For some reason the air seemed more unsettled than usual.

The next petitioner approached, an affluent merchant by the looks of him, and I dragged my attention back to the task at hand. This one liked having three women attending him, I could tell. In my experience men fell into two categories: either they were embarrassed by our greeting or else flattered.

As the man moved on, Hesione sidled up to me and handed me a rag to wipe my hands. My uncle liked her to keep to the background, but she was supposed to do a few servant's tasks to blend in.

"That one's not a wandering hero returning after ten years of besieging Daulis, I think," she whispered to me. We shared a grin.

“Carpophorus asked me to thank you for standing in for his mother,” Hesione added.

I cast a quick look at my cousin, who had taken his usual position at Uncle Phormio’s side. When he gave a grave nod, I looked away. “It’s not as if I had much choice.”

Hesione was sharp, growing up in the gutters had made her so. “You could do worse,” she pointed out, correctly deducing the reason for my bitterness.

“I know.” And she was right. Carpophorus was not a bad sort.

“He has a house of his own.”

I winced. How well she knew me. As a young girl I had fantasised about my Shadow finding me and sweeping me away, but lately my dreams had shrunk. Running my own house, even if it was for a pompous cousin with prematurely receding hair, had started to sound tempting. “I suppose I will have to give him my answer soon.”

“Perhaps you should.”

I nodded. Hesione meant well. We both knew that few men were eager to marry a Daughter of Hippotades, even if her gift was weak. Being a wind mage himself, in full possession of his powers, Carpophorus did not mind.

As the next petitioner was called, Hesione faded into the background again, yet I could not push her uncomfortably shrewd words from my mind. To distract myself, I began to plan next week’s meals. And when that had been exhausted, I catalogued what work needed to be done around the house, starting with polishing the mosaic floor of the reception chamber.

So the afternoon passed. It was with relief that I perceived the sun nearing the horizon: radiant Aethon stabling his golden chariot marked the end of the audience. I would soon be free to catch up on my neglected chores.

Then I saw him.

The line of men wanting to speak to my uncle had dwindled. He stood at the end of it, arms crossed on his chest. Dressed in the flowing white robe of a Khametish desert dweller, with a blue cloth draped round his head so that only his eyes showed, he seemed as much out of place amongst the other men as a hawk amongst pigeons.

Attending him was the tallest man I had ever seen, with arms and legs like tree trunks and his nose crooked as if it had been broken and set badly. He looked immensely strong, but obviously deferred to the man in the veil.

I leant over to Althea. "What is a Son of the Lion doing here?"

"He asked to speak to Father, but it can't be official."

I nodded. That much was obvious. Otherwise he would be down at the harbour, calling upon the Lion's Voice.

Philona giggled. "Carpophorus put him at the end of the line. He's been waiting all afternoon."

And he might not make it; already the setting sun was gilding the roofs of the town, granting the old, crumbling houses some of their former glory. Yet he gave no hint of impatience. His companion might fidget, but he stood immobile and quiet, perfectly happy to wait in our courtyard for however long it took. It was a deceptive stillness though, I suddenly thought, like that of a wave about to break.

A couple more petitioners were called, but my uncle disposed of their requests quickly. Was he curious to see the man?

Then, just as the sun's disk touched the horizon, the secretary cleared his throat. "Lord Ashkar, son of Sharaf," he called.

Motioning to his companion to stay back, the man unhurriedly strode forward, moving with controlled grace, like a

dancer. He submitted to Philona washing his feet, but stared straight ahead, ignoring us.

Once Philona finished drying off the water, I knelt down to do my part. He had strong, sinewy feet, tanned by the sun and calloused, as if he walked barefoot a lot, which surprised me. My jar of olive oil was nearly empty, so I dribbled the remainder on my fingers.

When I touched him, the world dropped away from under me.

I gasped. Out of nowhere a gust of wind whipped round us, only to die away a moment later. Looking up at him, I found him staring down at me with the whites of his eyes showing. His hand had gone to the hilt of the curved scimitar at his side. Had he felt it too?

His gaze travelled over me, and I saw the familiar confusion. Strangers never knew what to make of me. The honey blond hair – men always noticed that first – which said slave, the chiton and cloak bordered with an elegant pattern, which said refined Yavanah lady. And finally the golden torc at my throat, legacy of my mother's people, which said barbarian nobility.

My hands shaking, I quickly looked down and stumbled back. Some of the oil had spilt on the tesserae of the mosaic, making bright splashes amongst the dull pattern. Surely I was mistaken?

After a last piercing glance through the slit in his veil, he accepted the cup of wine from Althea. I wiped my sweaty hands on my dress and then swore inwardly. Here I had been careful all afternoon to use a rag and now had stained the white linen with grease. How had a simple touch flustered me so much? Looking up I found Carpophorus watching me with a puzzled frown. Had he sent that sudden gust of wind?

Lord Ashkar acknowledged my uncle by touching his heart and forehead in the traditional Khametish manner but did not make formal obeisance.

Uncle Phormio's brows drew together in a frown. His forefathers had ruled the seas of Yavanah for centuries, building their airy palaces, while this man's ancestors eked out a living following smelly camels. However, that no longer mattered, much as it might gall my uncle.

He folded his hands in front of his ample belly. "You asked to see me?"

A sharp nod. "Yes, Lord of the Winds. I wish to hire one of your mages."

Uncle Phormio gave an edged smile. "Just like that? I'm afraid my mages are very much in demand. What with the recent wars..." He let his voice trail away suggestively.

Lord Ashkar, whose people fought those wars, inclined his head. "I'm aware of that. And I'm willing to pay accordingly."

"Hmm." My uncle made a show of considering his words. "What kind of contract do you have in mind?"

"To get to Myrmekion before the spring festival. I pay in gold."

The first full moon after the spring equinox was celebrated as the beginning of the trading season, promising calmer seas. I made a quick mental calculation. He had four weeks to cover the distance, including the passage through the Gullet. Possible, I thought, but only just.

My uncle seemed to have come to the same conclusion. "That's a tight schedule. What urgent business takes you to Myrmekion?"

Lord Ashkar shrugged. "An advantageous trading offer."

Obviously he wasn't willing to divulge any more details, but I wondered if they existed at all. Never mind that Myrmekion

was the commercial hub of the Turquoise Sea. If this Lord Ashkar was a simple trader, then I was a Daughter of foam-born Kythereia, the goddess of love.

Uncle Phormio stroked the head of one of the dogs sitting by the side of his chair. Like most mages he always had a few animals along for misdirection: many people took them to be Shadows, especially if they were black.

“A trading matter,” he said. “How fascinating. I would very much like to be of assistance, but unfortunately I do not have anybody available at the moment. However...”

“Yes?” Lord Ashkar prompted. I could tell that he did not like his role as a petitioner.

Uncle Phormio smiled. “Why don’t you ask the Lion’s Voice? So many of our mages are serving his illustrious master, surely he could spare one to a fellow believer. Would you like me to lend you a servant to show you the way to his house?”

“That won’t be necessary, Wind Lord.” The words came out clipped and hard. A dip of the head, and Lord Ashkar turned to go.

He was leaving. Panic flooded through me at the sudden end to the audience. What should I do? Lord Ashkar brushed past us without dignifying me with so much as a glance. I might never see him again. The wind...

“Xanthe?” My cousin Carpophorus took me by the elbow. “What’s the matter with you? Did something happen?”

“I...I’m not sure,” I stuttered.

Never far from her lord, his Shadow Egina hovered behind him, her pretty, heart-shaped face anxious. “That man didn’t accost you, did he?” she asked with big eyes.

“No, not at all.” I hesitated. “It’s just – oh, nothing.”

My cousin frowned. “While I agree with Father on the importance of upholding our traditions, I sometimes think that

exposing our womenfolk to every stranger is a mistake.” He shot me a significant look. “In my household I have servants to perform the task.”

Really, he was overreacting. “I lost my balance, that’s all.”

Carpophorus drew me away. “Well, the man won’t bother us again. Father only wanted to know what brought him here. Matters in the Turquoise Sea have been unsettled lately.” He gave Egina and me a benign smile. “Still, that needn’t concern you. I’m sure two such pretty ladies have better things to do than worry about politics.”

Egina smiled shyly at his words, but I saw little to amuse me. Of course it concerned me that the Sons of the Lion were poised to overwhelm the last bastion of ancient Yavanah power – although it might not come to that, the fighting the previous summer had gone badly for them. However, I had a much more pressing matter to attend to.

I slipped my arm free. “Will you excuse me, Cousin? With your mother ill, the staff in the kitchen need supervising.”

“Of course. Will I have the pleasure of seeing you at the evening meal?”

I lowered my eyes. “You honour me. But your mother has asked me to sit with her.”

True enough, and I liked my gentle aunt, who had done her best to turn the hurt, angry niece sent to her into a proper Yavanah lady. Even if she had not always succeeded.

Carpophorus inclined his head. “You’re very kind.”

“Yes, very,” Egina echoed, though I did not think she would mind having him to herself.

Ever since he had claimed her from a family of impoverished wine merchants, she had worshipped him. Carpophorus had been lucky and found her on his first voyage. No doubt the gods had taken a hand, unlike with me. Until now?

Dismissing these thoughts, I slipped away and took one of the passages leading to the back door. I only had to talk to the man briefly. A mage was supposed to know at once, not be in a muddle like me. Surely I was mistaken? But I could not let him slip through my fingers without making sure.

Picking up my skirts, I hurried round the building to the front of the estate.

He was gone.



Dumbfounded, I stared at the deserted courtyard. Surely he couldn't have vanished that quickly. Farther down the hill I saw some of the audience dispersing, talking to each other, but there was no sign of a white robe. A numb feeling spread through me.

It was as if the gods were making fun of me, showing me a glimpse of what might be, only to snatch it away again. What had I done to deserve that? I had always been generous with my libations on feast days, giving them the first taste of the wine.

"Hippotades," I appealed to my divine ancestor, "please lend me your aid."

Then common sense reasserted itself. The man couldn't be far. If he intended to hire a wind mage, he had to have a ship, which meant that the logical place to look for him was down at the harbour. I hesitated, for dusk had descended. However, if I hurried, I could catch up with him long before he reached the more disreputable quarters of town.

Picking up my skirts again, I hurried across the courtyard and through the garden, which stretched around me empty, the gardeners having gone inside for their evening meal. Farther down the hill extended a grove of olive trees and cork oaks. Twilight pooled underneath their wide boughs, and I stumbled in the still, heavy air. The breeze had died with the setting sun.

Stopping to catch my breath, I wondered if I should send out the winds to bring me tidings. But he might be too far away for them to find him, and I had learnt long ago to hoard what little power I possessed. Was that the murmur of voices? I looked around but could not see anybody. Had I been mistaken?

Something touched my leg. I jumped, my heart in my mouth. Looking down, I found Lais, one of Uncle Phormio's black cats, gazing up at me.

"What a fright you gave me." I picked her up and stroked her.

The cat purred in response, her eyes glinting in the gloom. In one of her kind's inexplicable decisions, she had taken a liking to me.

I rubbed a cheek against her soft fur, glad for the company. It suddenly seemed very lonely with everybody gone inside. "Did you hear something too?"

The sound of voices came again, and this time I also caught a glimpse of white amongst the trees. Could it be? But what was the man doing in our orchard?

Still clutching the cat to my chest, I crept closer. Though I could only hear snatches of the conversation, it sounded like an argument.

"...else we'll never get there in time," a man was just saying.

"I know." I recognised Lord Ashkar's voice. "And as I've told you, we will find one."

Cautiously I peered round the trunk of an olive tree. In a small clearing Lord Ashkar, his tall companion from earlier on and three more men stood talking.

“Where will you find a mage?” one of them asked, the first voice I had heard. “High and mighty Lord Phormio won’t help, that’s for sure.”

Lord Ashkar shrugged. “He doesn’t control them all. I just need to get my hands on one. There are many kinds of persuasion.”

So he hadn’t given up. Pressing close to the tree I tried to get a better look at the others. My chiton snagged on the rough bark; it was hardly ideal clothing for stealing through the woods.

“Oh, for a pair of Saramati trousers,” I muttered to Lais.

That moment a twig snapped under my foot.

“What was that?”

Swearing inwardly at being discovered, I hesitated. What should I do? But they had no business sneaking round our orchard. And if it came to the worst, I could simply send a breeze to my uncle, asking for help. So I stepped out from behind the tree, feeling a little silly at holding Lais like a shield in my arms, but reassured by her warm weight.

“You,” I called imperiously. “What are you doing here?” At once they surrounded me, but I held my ground. “These are Lord Phormio’s estates.”

Lord Ashkar frowned at me. “It’s the girl from the audience. Why are you spying on us?”

“I’m doing nothing of the sort,” I snapped. What a nerve the man had, accusing me of spying when I had caught him sneaking round our property.

One of others, an older man with a nose hooked like a hawk’s beak, held out his hands placatingly. “We mean no harm to your master.” He shot Lord Ashkar a speaking glance. “But perhaps you can help us...”

I raised an eyebrow. “Why should I help you? And what do you want anyway?” They had my uncle’s answer.

“Only some information,” the man said. “Are there other wind mages up at the house apart from Lord Phormio and his son? And where would we find them?”

It seemed they still hoped to hire somebody. “None of the mages there will go against the Wind Lord’s wishes,” I told them. “You’ll need to look elsewhere.” Then I bit my lip. I did not want them to leave, at least not before I had tested my feeling.

“If I want a servant’s opinion, I’ll ask for it,” Lord Ashkar snapped, clearly exasperated. He turned to the other man. “Thaneni, we’re wasting our time.”

“Peace, Ashkar,” his friend said. He smiled at me, not really a reassuring sight with that beak of a nose. “Get us inside the house without being seen, and we’ll make it worth your while. Surely a clever girl like you would know a way?”

My mouth had fallen open at being called a servant, but now I closed it with a snap. “How dare you. I have a mind to tell Lord Phormio.” Sensing my mood, Lais in my arms hissed.

Lord Ashkar glared at me. “I don’t have time for this. Tell us what we want to know.” He grabbed me.

Instinctively I called the winds. They answered with a roar, flinging him away and whirling leaves around us in a crazy maelstrom. Yowling, Lais shot out of my arms and up the olive tree.

“I don’t believe it,” I whispered, frozen with astonishment.

Never before had the winds responded with such power. I stared at Lord Ashkar, lying there on the ground.

My Shadow.

Stunned, he shook his head, then rolled over and rose in one smooth motion. “You’re a mage.”

I held out my hands. “Look, I won’t hurt you—”

“Get her, Khuy,” he said.

Something hard hit me over the back of the head.

* * *

Voices. One gruff and fast. Annoyed. The other deeper, fuller. They faded in and out.

“—should never have taken her—”

“—you worry too much—”

“—explain to the Wind Lord?”

“—long gone—”

A red-hot mallet was hammering away inside my head.

“—come after us?”

“—no choice—”

I groaned and rolled onto my side. Blood pounded in my ears, every beat of my heart sending a lance of pain through me.

“She’s coming round,” one of them said.

“Here.” It was the other, deeper voice. An arm slid under my shoulders and lifted me into a sitting position. “Open your mouth.”

Gratefully I leant against the man’s chest. His simple presence seemed to relieve my headache. When he pressed a spoon against my lips, I swallowed obediently. The bitterness mixed with cloying sweetness tasted familiar: preparation of Ophiochus, a universal remedy against illness. What was the matter with me?

I squinted at the room, wincing when my eyes met the light of a lamp. I must still be dizzy, for the floor seemed to rise and dip. Feeling queasy, I closed my eyes and snuggled against my companion, whose clothes smelled comfortingly of sea and salt. With his arms around me, a sensation of rightness filled me, of having found something I had missed all my life.

“Better?” he asked.

I gave a sigh of contentment. “Hmm.”

However, the bed continued to rise and fall. Another familiar sensation. What was I doing on a boat? Slowly, blurred memories floated into my mind. The audience chamber, talking to my cousin, the garden. A man with his face wrapped in blue cloth, only dark eyes showing.

I sat bolt upright. "You!"

Lord Ashkar let go of me. "Slowly, you've had a nasty knock."

"I should say so." Pain shot through my head, forcing me to lower my voice. "How dare you."

"Dare what?"

I tried to glare at him, but it hurt. "You told your man to hit me."

"Not quite. I only wanted to seize you, but I'm afraid Khuy panicked and overreacted."

"Overreacted? What did he hit me with, a tree trunk?"

A snort. "Khuy has that effect on people." He peered at my eyes and poured another spoonful of preparation of Ophiochus from a small bottle. "Here, take this, it will help."

I accepted the medicine but gave him another scowl. Even frowning hurt. "You'll be sorry for treating a Daughter of Hippotades in such a manner." I motioned vaguely at my aching head, the bed, him sitting next to me, not sure what infuriated me most. "The gods will be angry."

Lord Ashkar rose. "I'll trust in the Bright One to protect me."

He sounded unconcerned. So he was of the new religion? Well, that was hardly surprising, most of the Khametish had set their old beliefs aside and only worshipped the sun.

For the first time I took in my surroundings properly. We had an interested audience in the older man that I had seen with Lord Ashkar earlier on and the tall guard standing against the door.

He had to hunch his shoulders, the ceiling of the small cabin was so low. A brass lantern lit up the tiny space, showing me its sparse furniture. Besides the bunk I was sitting on, it consisted only of a chest fastened to the floor.

“Where are we?”

“On *Aglaia*.” Lord Ashkar reached up and stroked one of the beams running along the ceiling. “Built three years ago in the wharves of Acanthus, the sweetest sailer on all the seas.”

For some reason the Khametish gave all their ships Yavanah names, perhaps because they had learnt sailing from us. This one seemed to be no exception. But I did not feel in the mood to be impressed. “So what?”

He lowered his hand and frowned at me, annoyed by my lack of admiration for his ship. Well, I didn’t care.

“You will set me ashore at once,” I said in my most commanding manner. “If you’re lucky, my absence hasn’t been noticed yet.”

Thinking about it, I was pretty sure it had not been. I had promised to keep Aunt Demetria company, but she would not cause a fuss if I did not turn up. They would not miss me till morning; I should be able to sneak back inside long before that without anybody being the wiser. And then, I thought suddenly. What would I do?

The other man had taken a step forward and grabbed Lord Ashkar’s arm. “She’s right, listen to her.”

Lord Ashkar shook his head. “No, Thaneni. I’ve told you before, I won’t change my mind.”

“Think about it,” the other man pleaded. “The Wind Lord will be furious.”

“I’ll face that when we come to it.”

“But—”

“No buts.” The words came explosively, but at once he regained control and lowered his voice. “It’s our last chance. Time is running out.”

Their loud voices did not exactly help my headache. I picked up the bottle of medicine and poured myself another generous measure of the syrupy, amber liquid, sending a silent plea to the Serpent Bearer, god of healing, to make it act quickly. “What do you want from me?”

“I have a proposition for you.”

“Yes?” I wondered if he intended to hold me for ransom. Wonderful. I had to be the first mage ever to have been abducted by her Shadow.

“As I’ve told Lord Phormio, I need to get to Myrmekion before the spring festival. The winds are against me; it cannot be done without help.” He took a deep breath. “That’s why I want to hire you.”

I set down the bottle of medicine and buried my aching head in my hands. “What?”

“I’ll pay you twice the going rate.”

It had to be a joke. My Shadow wanted to hire me? Once, the fact of finding him would have overjoyed me, but now I felt like Khloris opening her jar and having all the ills of the world fly out. “You must be out of your mind.”

“Four times the rate if you get us there in time.”

I could not help thinking that he did not have much practice at bargaining. First he told me I was his last chance and the next moment he doubled his offer.

A groan escaped me. “I don’t want your gold.”

“If not gold then something else?”

I shook my head, wincing at a lance of pain.

“Jewels, lands, a business of your own?”

“No.”

He took a step closer, those dark eyes of his pinning me down. "Then what do you want, woman? Everybody has a price."

"What is yours?" I shot back.

His eyes became hooded. "That's none of your business."

"Well, mine is none of yours."

"Your freedom?"

"What?"

He indicated the golden torc at my neck. "I was a fool to think you a servant, even a very favoured one. That's a Saramati torc, isn't it?"

A very favoured servant? Blood rushed to my cheeks when I realised what he meant. In what gutter had this man learnt his manners? "That does not concern you."

"Did they take you hostage? I can get you back to your family, you know."

I nearly laughed out loud, remembering how my mother and her new husband had sent me back to Uncle Phormio at the first manifestation of my gift. I doubted I would be any more welcome now.

"No, thank you."

Suddenly I felt very tired. I had found and lost my Shadow at the same time. Under ancient Yavanah law, a mage had a claim on her Shadow. In the old days, I would have owned him outright, but I had no chance of enforcing my rights against a Khametish noble.

Rising on shaky legs, I steadied myself against the wall. "Just take me back."

He seized me by the shoulders. "Listen, woman, there must be something you want."

Once again I felt the tension strumming between us like the strings of a lute wound too tight. Could he feel it too? How tempting to take that power and weave the winds into any shape I

desired. Out of nowhere a breeze sprang up, tumbling my hair in a golden shower across his hands.

The other men exclaimed in surprise at the sudden wind; a dagger appeared as if from thin air in one of the tall guard's hands.

Lord Ashkar held my gaze. "I'll offer you anything."

I caught my breath. "Anything?"

He shrugged. "Anything in my power. Obviously I can't give you the moon."

I didn't want the moon. I wanted my Shadow, for him to stay at my side for the rest of his life. Only then could I reach my full potential as a mage.

"If I get you to Myrmekion in time for the spring festival, you promise to give me whatever I demand?" I said slowly, still thinking furiously.

Whatever possessed him to make such an outrageous offer? He had to want something really badly. And it was no business deal, of that I was sure.

"Yes."

Our eyes met for a long moment, measuring each other. I lifted my chin. "Agreed then."

He gave a curt nod and released me. "Your name?"

"Xanthe, daughter of Iamus."

Lord Ashkar put his hand to his heart. "Lady Xanthe, you have my word."

Awkwardly I followed his example. "And you have mine."

"Fine. You can start now."

"What?" He really had a gift for taking me by surprise with his announcements.

"The tide has turned a while ago. We'll slip out of the harbour with it; the moon is bright enough to show the way."

Reluctantly I nodded agreement, though I still felt unsteady. "Very well," I said, trying to sound professional.

“Does your Shadow require anything?” the other man threw in. “Unfortunately we don’t have any milk, but a piece of fish perhaps?”

I stared at him in confusion. Whatever could he mean? Lord Ashkar didn’t strike me as the milk drinking type.

The man gestured at the bed. “She’s been hiding under there ever since we let her out.”

Only then did I notice scratches on his arms and a tattered jute bag lying on the floor. Beginning to understand, I squatted down and looked under the bed: two green eyes glinted back at me.

I held out my hand to the cat. “Come here, Lais. It looks like we’re going on a journey.”

She hissed at me.

THREE

Lais refused to leave her refuge, so in the end I let her be. The door of the small cabin opened onto the main deck and from there steep stairs led up to the quarterdeck above.

They had anchored out in the bay. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I made out the lamps of the harbour and the dark shadow of the hill rising beyond it. Near the top, lights marked a solitary house: Uncle Phormio's. My home for the last ten years.

I swallowed. Now was the last chance to change my mind. To creep back into the house with nobody the wiser, my reputation untarnished, to take up my constrained but safe life, to marry my cousin...

Then a gust of wind curled around me seductively, whispering tales of far away places. Moonlight glittered on the water, and small waves lapped against the hull, murmuring secrets. Taking a deep breath, I turned my attention to the preparations for getting under way.

Lord Ashkar gave a few muted orders, and in response men climbed up the rope ladders leading from the sides of the ship up to the masts. Suddenly I noticed that the land was receding, the few lights of the town blinking out, yet I had not heard them lift anchor.

“The ship’s moving already,” I exclaimed.

“We can’t afford to wait around, so I gave orders a while ago,” Lord Ashkar replied with complete confidence. “I do not intend to miss the tide.”

“But you couldn’t have known I would agree to your plan.”

He shrugged. “I’ve never yet met a Yavanah mage who didn’t wish for something. I knew we would come to an agreement.”

“I’m not like that,” I protested, annoyed at his dismissive tone. “What if I had refused?”

“I would have found a way.”

He did not elaborate, and I wondered uneasily what he would have done, had I declined his offer. Wind was a powerful tool, but not much use against a ship full of armed men. Especially since one of them was my Shadow.

“Do you need your cat up here?” he asked, changing the subject.

I hesitated. “No, that won’t be necessary.” I would have to tell him the truth sometime. But not now.

“Look over there,” he said, pointing ahead to where a rocky promontory jutted out into the sea. “We will sail round that, but give it a wide berth to avoid the shallows. When we hit the channel between Eolia and the neighbouring island, there will be a current from the tide carrying us along. It won’t last much longer, and we’ve wasted too much time already, so we need to hurry. Once the tide turns, we might be swept back. Can you do it?”

He had been quite serious about starting at once. “Yes,” I answered firmly. A last look over my shoulder showed me the lights of my home fading fast. Was I really doing this?

With a soft whoosh the sails came down, unfurling like white ghosts in the gentle breeze. I reached out to get a feeling of the air around us. Lord Ashkar meanwhile conferred with the helmsman and put his hands on the wheel to get a sense of the handling of the ship.

“Haul on the braces,” he called in a harsh whisper.

The men pulled on the ropes that were fixed to the yards and fastened them. It was all done quietly, with as little noise as a burglar stealing out of a house.

Lord Ashkar came back to me. “All right. We’re sailing on a broad reach, just as *Aglaia* likes,” he said. “I want you to call a gentle northerly wind to push her towards starboard, enough to give those rocks plenty of room.”

I dragged up what nautical knowledge I had gleaned from overhearing discussions amongst my cousins. Starboard was to the right, wasn’t it? It seemed to make sense, as the headland came up on our left.

“Fine.” Mustering all my confidence, I reached out with my senses again. Hopefully I would get it right; otherwise it might prove a very short cruise indeed.

One of my cousins’ teachers had once described the world as a giant loom, with the winds woven into its fabric. The boys had not liked such a domestic picture and preferred to think of the winds as horses that needed to be tamed, but to me it made sense. The art of a wind mage consisted of pulling on those threads and rearranging them to her liking, but without tearing the fabric that held them.

With that in mind, I identified the wind currents around us and settled on the weak seaward breeze filling *Aglaia*’s sails. It

would do, I only needed to change its direction. Wrapping my will around it, I gave a firm tug.

Wind howled past me, streaming out my hair. The ship began to tilt; with the deck pitching under me, I lost my footing. Shouts of alarm rang out.

Strong hands grabbed me. "What are you doing, you fool. Stop that or she'll keel over."

Stunned, I let go of the wind. Recoiling, the ship bucked like a shying horse, throwing us to the other side. I found myself in Lord Ashkar's arms. He righted me impatiently and pushed me towards the rail, then lunged for the wheel to help the helmsman, who'd been flung to the deck. Shouting orders, he sent a man forward to check. Following his eyes, I saw that our mishap had brought us closer to the headland instead of widening the gap.

He relinquished the wheel to the helmsman and spun back to grab me by the shoulders. "A gentle breeze I said. I'm warning you, if you scrape *Aglaia* on those rocks, I'll take it out of your hide."

Not very reassuring words. Wasn't a Shadow supposed to have an instinctive desire to please his mage? Instead, mine seemed to have taken a strong dislike to me. Again I reached out for my chosen wind, but this time I drew on it as if it were a delicate silk yarn that I wanted to unravel from an embroidery. In the old days, I couldn't have stirred as much as a leaf with such a feeble effort.

The breeze picked up, and above us the sails filled.

"Yes, that's it," Lord Ashkar declared. "A little more."

Holding my breath, I dared to pull harder. The ship responded to the freshening wind, but like a pure-bred racehorse this time, full of grace. A moment later we were past and moved out into the channel.

When Lord Ashkar gave the order to adjust course, I released the wind on a breath of relief. His hold on my shoulders relaxed, but he regarded me searchingly.

“You have done this before?”

I thought of the toy boats we used to chase across the pond in the garden. “Oh, yes. The ship is just a little bit bigger than I’m accustomed to.”

“Right.” He did not sound convinced but let me go. “Do you think you could strengthen our following wind? Only a little, mind you.”

“Of course.”

A low chest stood against the rail, making an improvised seat. I sat down and wrapped my cloak, which I had found lying on the cabin floor, around me. The night had grown chilly out on the water, and the thin fabric did little to warm me, but it was better than nothing.

Closing my eyes, I visualised the winds lying like a blanket over both land and sea. If I sped up the eddies flowing down from the hills while easing the pressure at the mouth of the channel, that would answer nicely.

Only a day ago, I would never even have considered such an ambitious undertaking, but now anything seemed possible. A sudden bolt of excitement shot through me at the thought of what power I held. It was an exhilarating feeling, like drinking strong wine. However, I had learnt my lesson and proceeded with care. Without opening my eyes, I could hear the sound of the wind humming through the rigging change to a higher pitch.

“She’s running sweetly now, Captain,” the helmsman said. As the ship cleaved through the waves, water hissed along her hull.

“Yes. Let’s hope the woman can keep it up.”

My eyes flew open. Really, why had he abducted me if he thought me so useless? “I can do this for as long as you wish,” I snapped.

A harsh laugh. “Little do you know.” Without waiting for an answer, he turned to the helmsman. “Keep her on this course, northwest by north. I’m going aloft.”

Lord Ashkar shed his voluminous outer robe, revealing a shirt and trousers beneath it. Barefoot like the rest of the crew, he swung down to the main deck where he scrambled up the ropes as nimbly as any of his men.

The ship pitched with the waves, adding the sound of creaking wood to the melody of wind and water. Suddenly a memory from when I was a little child came into my mind: my father, a big, laughing figure, standing on just such a deck. Even when busy he had always welcomed my company, throwing me up in the air until I squealed or letting me ride on his broad shoulders.

A lump formed in my throat. He had died from an illness when I was six. Uncle Phormio had told me with disapproval that my mother and I used to accompany my father on all his travels. I grimaced. Uncle Phormio had disapproved of a lot of my father’s actions. What would he say of mine?

Feeling chilly, I wrapped my arms around myself. On my right the full moon was rising higher, dimming the stars and shedding its cool light over the sea. While I still kept a light rein on the wind, it did not need much effort, as I was only reinforcing its natural tendency.

With the town left behind us, only the occasional herdsman’s fire high up on the hills betrayed the presence of humans. We might almost have sailed into that mythical time when my divine forebear first spotted a beautiful shepherdess dancing in a grove on Eolia and decided to seduce her. A union that had resulted in the birth of the first wind mage.

Lord Ashkar came sliding down one of the ropes that moment, landing with a soft bump and interrupting my thoughts. He cast me a sharp glance, leant over the rail and gave a soft-spoken order. Soon after, the big guard came up the stairs from below, carrying a voluminous bundle.

Lord Ashkar dumped it in my lap. “Here, for you.”

To my surprise it was a warm, woollen cloak, still smelling of sandalwood from storage. I wrapped it round me, only then realising that I was shivering. “Thank you.”

He turned away. “I don’t want you to catch a cold. You’re no use to me ill.”

His curt words left me speechless. Really, where had the man learnt his manners?

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