Phantom

Terry Goodkind

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

Kahlan stood quietly in the shadows, watching, as evil knocked softly on the door. Huddled under the small overhang, off to the side, she hoped that no one would answer that knock. As much as she would like to spend the night in out of the rain, she didn't want trouble to visit innocent people. She knew, though, that she had no say in the matter.

The light of a single lantern flickered weakly through the slender windows to either side of the door, reflecting a pale, shimmering glow off the wet floor of the portico. The sign overhead, hung by two iron rings, grated and squealed each time it swung back and forth in the wind-borne rain. Kahlan was able to make out the spectral white shape of a horse painted on the dark, wet sign. The light from the windows wasn't enough to enable her to read the name, but because the other three women with her had talked of little else for days, Kahlan knew that the name would be the White Horse Inn.

By the smell of manure and wet hay, she judged that one of the dark buildings nearby had to be a stable. In the sporadic displays of distant lightning, she could just make out the hulking shoulders of dark structures standing like ghosts beyond the billowing sheets of rain. Despite the steady roar of the deluge and the rumble of thunder, it appeared that the village was sound asleep. Kahlan could think of no better place to be on such a dark and wretched night than bundled up under bed covers, safe and warm.

A horse in the nearby stable whinnied when Sister Ulicia knocked a second time, louder, more insistently, evidently intending herself to be heard over the riot of rain, yet not so

loud as to sound hostile. Sister Ulicia, a woman given to reckless impulse, seemed to be taking a deliberately restrained approach. Kahlan didn't know why, but imagined that it had to do with the reason they were there. It also might have been nothing more than the random nature of her moods. Like lightning, the woman's smoldering bad temper was not only dangerous but unpredictable. Kahlan couldn't always tell exactly when Sister Ulicia would lash out, and just because she so far hadn't didn't mean that she wouldn't. Neither of the other two Sisters was in any better mood or any less inclined toward losing their temper. Kahlan supposed that soon enough the three of them would be happy and quietly celebrating the reunion.

Lightning flashed close enough that the blinding but halting incandescence briefly revealed a whole street of buildings crowded close around the muddy, rutted road. Thunder boomed through the mountainous countryside and shook the ground beneath their feet.

Kahlan wished that there was something—like the way lightning revealed things otherwise hidden in the obscurity of night—that could help illuminate the hidden memories of her past and bring to light what was concealed by the murky mystery of who she was. She had a fierce longing to be free of the Sisters, a burning desire to live her own life—to know what her life really was. That much she knew about herself. She knew, too, that her convictions had to be founded in experience. It was obvious to her that there had to be something there—people and events—that had helped make her the woman she was, but try as she might to recall them, they were lost to her.

That terrible day she stole the boxes for the Sisters, she had promised herself that someday she would find the truth of who she was, and she would be free.

When Sister Ulicia knocked a third time, a muffled voice came from inside.

"I heard you!" It was a man's voice. His bare feet thumped down wooden stairs. "I'll be right there! A moment, please!"

His annoyance at having been awakened in the middle of

the night was layered over with forced deference to potential customers.

Sister Ulicia turned a sullen look on Kahlan. "You know that we have business here." She lifted a cautionary finger before Kahlan's face. "Don't you even think of giving us any trouble, or you'll get what you got the last time."

Kahlan swallowed at the reminder. "Yes, Sister Ulicia."

"Tovi had better have gotten us a room," Sister Cecilia complained. "I'm in no mood to be told the place is full."

"There will be room," Sister Armina said with soothing assurance, cutting off Sister Cecilia's habit of always assuming the worst.

Sister Armina wasn't older, like Sister Cecilia, but nearly as young and attractive as Sister Ulicia. To Kahlan, though, their looks were insignificant in light of their inner nature. To Kahlan, they were vipers.

"One way or another," Sister Ulicia added under her breath as she glared at the door, "there will be room."

Lightning arced through the greenish, roiling clouds, releasing an earsplitting boom of thunder.

The door opened a crack. The shadowed face of a man peered out at them as he worked to button up his trousers under his nightshirt. He moved his head a little to each side so that he could take in the strangers. Judging them to be less than dangerous, he pulled open the door and with a sweeping gesture ushered them inside.

"Come on in, then," he said. "All of you."

"Who is it?" A woman called out as she descended the stairs to the rear. She carried a lantern in one hand and held the hem of her nightdress up with the other so that she wouldn't trip on it as she hurried down the steps.

"Four women traveling in the middle of a rainy night," the man told her, his gruff tone alluding to what he thought of such a practice.

Kahlan froze in midstride. He'd said "four women."

He had seen all four of them and had remembered as much long enough to say so. As far as she could recall, such a thing had never happened before. No one but her masters, the four

Sisters—the three with her and the one they had come to meet—ever remembered seeing her.

Sister Cecilia shoved Kahlan in ahead of her, apparently not catching the significance of the remark.

"Well for goodness' sake," the woman said as she hurried between the two plank tables. She tsked at the foul weather as the wind drove a rattle of rain against the windows. "Do get them in out of that awful weather, Orlan."

Streamers of fat raindrops chased them in the door, wetting a patch of pine floor. The man's mouth twisted with displeasure as he pushed the door closed against a wet gust and then dropped the heavy iron bar back in the brackets to bolt the door.

The woman, her hair gathered up in a loose bun, lifted her lantern a little as she peered at the late-night guests. Puzzled, she squinted as her gaze swept over the drenched visitors and then back again. Her mouth opened but then she seemed to forget what she had been about to say.

Kahlan had seen that blank look a thousand times and knew that the woman only remembered seeing three callers. No one could ever remember seeing Kahlan long enough to say so. She was as good as invisible. Kahlan thought that maybe because of the darkness and rain the man, Orlan, had merely made a mistake when he'd said to his wife that there were four visitors.

"Come in and get yourselves dry," the woman said as she smiled in earnest warmth. She hooked a hand under Sister Ulicia's arm, drawing her into the small gathering room. "Welcome to the White Horse Inn."

The other two Sisters, openly scrutinizing the room, took off their cloaks and gave them a quick shake before tossing them over a bench at one of the two tables. Kahlan noticed a single dark doorway at the back, beside the stairs. A fireplace made of stacked, flat stones took up most of the wall to the right. The air in the dimly lit room was warm and carried the distractingly enticing aroma of a stew in the iron pot hung from a crane pushed to the side of the hearth. Hot coals glowed out from under a thick layer of feathery ashes.

"You three ladies look like drowned cats. You must be

miserable." The woman turned to the man and gestured. "Orlan, get the fire going."

Kahlan saw a young girl of maybe eleven or twelve years slip down the stairs just far enough so she could see into the room from under the low ceiling. Her long white nightdress with ruffled cuffs had a pony stitched in coarse brown thread on the front, with a row of loose strands of dark yarn making up the mane and tail. The girl sat on the steps to watch, tenting her nightdress over her bony knees. Her grin revealed big teeth that she had yet to grow into. Strangers arriving in the middle of the night apparently was an adventure at the White Horse Inn. Kahlan dearly hoped that that was all there would be to the adventure.

Orlan, a big bear of a man, knelt at the hearth, stacking on a few sticks of wood. His thick, stubby fingers made the wedges of oak look to be little more than kindling.

"What would possess you ladies to travel in the rain—at night?" he asked as he cast them a look over his shoulder.

"We're in a hurry to catch up with a friend of ours," Sister Ulicia said, offering a meaningless smile. She kept her tone businesslike. "She was to meet us here. Her name is Tovi. She will be expecting us."

The man put a hand on his knee to help himself up. "Those guests who stay with us—especially in such troubled times—are pretty discreet. Most don't give their names." He lifted an eyebrow at Sister Ulicia. "Much like you ladies—not giving your names, that is."

"Orlan, they're guests," the woman scolded. "Wet, and no doubt tired and hungry, guests." She flashed a smile. "Folks call me Emmy. My husband, Orlan, and I have run the White Horse since his parents passed away, years back." Emmy gathered up three wooden bowls from a shelf. "You ladies must be famished. Let me get you some stew. Orlan, get some mugs and fetch these ladies some hot tea."

Orlan lifted a meaty hand on his way past, indicating the bowls his wife cradled in an arm. "You're one short."

She twitched a frown at him. "No I'm not; I have three bowls."

Orlan pulled four mugs down from the top shelf of the hutch. "Right. Like I said, you're one short."

Kahlan could hardly breathe. Something was very wrong. Sisters Cecilia and Armina had frozen dead still, their wide eyes fixed on the man. The significance of the couple's chitchat had not escaped them.

Kahlan glanced to the stairwell and saw the girl on the steps leaning toward them, gripping the rails, peering out, trying to fathom what her parents were talking about.

Sister Armina snatched Sister Ulicia's sleeve. "Ulicia," she said in an urgent whisper through gritted teeth, "he sees—"

Sister Ulicia shushed her. Her brow drew down in a dark glare as she turned her attention back to the man.

"You are mistaken," she said. "There are only three of us."

At the same time she was talking she prodded Kahlan with the stout oak rod she carried, shoving her farther back into the shadows behind, as if shadows alone would make Kahlan invisible to the man.

Kahlan didn't want to be in the shadows. She wanted to stand in the light and be seen—really seen. Such a thing had always seemed an impossible dream, but it had suddenly become a real possibility. That possibility had shaken the three Sisters.

Orlan frowned at Sister Ulicia. Holding all four mugs in the grip of one meaty hand, he used his other to point out each visitor standing in his gathering room. "One, two, three"—he leaned to the side, looking around Sister Ulicia, to point at Kahlan—"four. Do you all want tea?"

Kahlan blinked in astonishment. Her heart felt as if it had come up in her throat. He saw her . . . and remembered what he saw.

CHAPTER 2

It can't be," Sister Cecilia whispered as she wrung her hands. She leaned toward Sister Ulicia, her eyes darting about. "It's impossible." Her familiar, incessant but meaningless smile was nowhere in evidence.

"Something's gone wrong. . . ." Sister Armina's voice trailed off when her sky blue eyes glanced Sister Ulicia's way.

"It's nothing more than an anomaly," Sister Ulicia growled under her breath as she leveled a dangerous look at the two of them. Never ones to be servile, the two nonetheless showed no evidence of wanting to argue with their stormy leader.

In three strong strides Sister Ulicia closed the distance to Orlan. She seized the collar of his nightshirt in her fist. With her other hand she swished her oak rod in the direction of Kahlan, standing in the shadows back near the door.

"What does she look like?"

"Like a drowned cat," Orlan said in ill humor, obviously not liking her hand on his collar.

Kahlan knew without doubt that using such a tone of voice with Sister Ulicia was the wrong thing to do, but the Sister, instead of exploding in a rage, seemed to be just as astonished as Kahlan.

"I know that, but what does she look like? Tell me what you see."

Orlan straightened, pulling his collar away from her grip. His features drew tight as he appraised the stranger only he and the Sisters saw standing in the weak light of the lanterns.

"Thick hair. Green eyes. A very attractive woman. She'd look a lot better if she were dried out, although those wet

things on her do tend to show off what she's made of." He began to smile in a way that Kahlan didn't like one bit, even if she was overjoyed that he really saw her. "Mighty fine figure on her," he added, more to himself than the Sister.

His slow and deliberate evaluation made Kahlan feel naked. As his gaze roamed over her, he wiped the corner of his mouth with a thumb. She could hear it rasp against his stubble. One of the sticks of wood in the hearth caught flame, brightening the room in its flickering glow, letting him see even more. His gaze wandered upward, and then caught on something.

"Her hair is as long as . . ."

Orlan's bawdy smile evaporated.

He blinked in surprise. His eyes widened. "Dear spirits," he whispered as his face went ashen. He dropped to a knee. "Forgive me," he said, addressing Kahlan. "I didn't recognize—"

The room rang with a crack as Sister Ulicia whacked him across the top of the head with her oak rod, dropping him to both knees.

"Silence!"

"What's the matter with you?" the man's wife cried out as she rushed to her husband's side. She squatted, putting an arm around his shoulders to steady him as he groaned and put a big hand over the bloody wound on the top of his bowed head. His sandy-colored hair turned dark and wet under his fingers.

"Are all of you crazy?" She cradled her husband's head to her breast, where a red stain grew against her nightdress. He appeared stunned senseless. "Unless you travel in the company of a spirit, there are only three of you! How dare you—"

"Silence!" Sister Ulicia growled in a way that gave Kahlan an icy shiver and made the woman's mouth snap closed.

Rain pattered against the window while in the distance a slow rumble of thunder rolled through the forested hills. Kahlan could hear the sign squeaking as it swung to and fro each time the wind gusted. Inside the house it had gone dead silent. Sister Ulicia looked over at the girl, now at the bottom of the steps, where she stood gripping the simple, square, wooden newel post.

Sister Ulicia fixed the girl in a glare that only a sorceress

in a vile mood could marshal. "How many visitors do you see?"

The girl stood wide-eyed, too frightened to speak.

"How many?" Sister Ulicia asked again, this time through gritted teeth in a voice so threatening that it made the girl's grip on the newel post tighten until her fingers stood out white and bloodless against the dark wood.

The girl finally answered in a meek voice. "Three."

Sister Armina, looking like bottled thunder, leaned close. "Ulicia, what's going on? This isn't supposed to be possible. Not possible at all. We cast the verification webs."

"Exterior," Sister Cecilia corrected.

Sister Armina blinked at the older woman. "What?"

"We only cast exterior verification webs. We didn't do an interior review."

"Are you out of your mind?" Sister Armina snapped. "In the first place it isn't necessary and in the second place who would be fool enough to be the one to do an aspect analysis of a verification web from an interior perspective? No one ever does such a thing! It isn't necessary!"

"I'm only saying—"

With a withering look, Sister Ulicia silenced them both. Sister Cecilia, her wet curls plastered to her scalp, looked like she was about to finish her complaint, but then decided instead to remain mute.

Orlan seemed to recover his senses as he pulled away from his wife's embrace and began to stagger to his feet. Blood ran down his forehead and to either side of his broad nose.

"Were I you, innkeeper," Sister Ulicia said, turning her attention back to him, "I'd remain on my knees."

The menace in her voice gave him pause for only a moment. He was clearly angry as he rose up to his full height, letting his bloody hand drop away from his head. His back straightened, his chest expanded, and his fists tightened. Kahlan could clearly tell that his temper was outpacing his sense of caution.

Sister Ulicia indicated with her rod that she wanted Kahlan to back away. Kahlan, ignoring the direction, instead stepped

closer to Sister Ulicia, hoping to change the rush of events before it ended up being too late.

"Please, Sister Ulicia, he will answer your questions—I know he will. Let him be."

The three Sisters turned unpleasantly surprised looks on Kahlan. She had not been spoken to, or asked to speak. Such insolence would cost her dearly, she knew, but she also knew what was liable to happen to the man if something didn't change, and right then it seemed to her that she was the only one who could effect a change.

Besides, Kahlan knew that this was her only chance to find out something about herself—to perhaps find out who she really was and maybe even why she could remember only the most recent parts of her life. This man had clearly recognized her. He very well might be the key that could unlock her lost past. She dared not let the chance slip away—even if she had to risk the Sisters' wrath.

Before the Sisters had a chance to say anything, Kahlan addressed the man. "Please, Master Orlan, listen for a moment. We're looking for an older woman named Tovi. She was to meet these women here. We were delayed, so she should already be here, waiting for us. Please, answer their questions about their friend. This could all be quickly resolved if you would hurry upstairs and get Tovi for them. Then, like this passing storm, we will all soon be out of your lives."

The man reverently dipped his head, as if a queen had asked his help. Kahlan was not only surprised, but completely bewildered by such an act of deference.

"But we have no guest named Tovi here, Mot—"

The room lit with a blinding flash—lightning that was the match of anything out in the raging storm. The twisting rope of liquid heat and light that ignited from between Sister Ulicia's hands blasted across Orlan's chest before he could finish the appellation he had been about to use. The jarring concussion from being so close to the explosive detonation of such thunderous power hammered deep into the core of Kahlan's chest. The impact threw Orlan back, sending him crashing through a table and both benches, slamming him against the wall. The

deadly contact with such power had nearly cut the man in half. Smoke curled up from what was left of his shirt. A glistening red splatter of gore marked the wall where he'd hit before slumping to the ground.

In the aftermath of the deafening blast, Kahlan's ears rang in what seemed the sudden silence.

Emmy, her eyes wide with the shock of an event that had in an instant forever altered the course of her life, wailed the single word "No!"

Kahlan pressed a hand over her mouth and nose, not just in revulsion, but to mask the smell of blood and the stench of burned flesh. The lantern that had been on the table had been thrown to the floor and extinguished, leaving the room mostly to the wavering shadows cast by the fire in the hearth and the sporadic flashes of lightning coming in the slender windows.

Had it not been a night already filled with thunder and lightning, such a blast would surely have awakened the entire town.

The wooden bowls Emmy had been holding clattered down onto the floor and rolled drunkenly away. She screamed in horror and ran toward her husband.

Sister Ulicia came unhinged. In a fury she intercepted Emmy before she could reach her dead husband.

Sister Ulicia slammed the woman against the wall. "Where's Tovi? I want answers and I want them right now!"

Kahlan saw that the Sister had brought her dacra to hand. The simple weapon looked like nothing more than a knife handle with a sharpened metal rod in place of a blade. All three Sisters carried a dacra. Kahlan had seen them use the weapons when they had encountered Imperial Order scouts. She knew that once the dacra had pierced a victim, no matter how minor the penetration, it took only a thought on the Sister's part to kill. With the dacra it was not the wound itself that killed, but rather the Sister who, through the dacra, extinguished the spark of life. If the Sister didn't withdraw the weapon, along with her intent to kill, there was no defense, and no chance of salvation.

A confusing, faltering flash of lightning lit the room through

the narrow windows beside the door, throwing long spikes of shadows across the floor and against the walls as two Sisters together snatched the panicked woman, struggling to control her. As the fit of lighting ended and a dark pall again descended over the room, the third Sister raced up the stairwell.

Kahlan went for the girl.

As she ran toward her mother, Kahlan intercepted the girl, hooking her around her middle, holding her back. Her eyes went wide in panic, her mind unable to maintain the memory of seeing Kahlan even long enough for her to be aware of who or what had grabbed her—seemingly out of thin air. Far worse, though, she had just seen her father killed. Kahlan knew that the girl would never be able to forget such a terrible sight.

Over the steady drumbeat of rain and wind, Kahlan heard the footfalls of the Sister upstairs as she rushed down the hallway. She paused intermittently, stopping at each room to throw open a door. Any guests who had been awakened by the commotion and shouting, and dared to come out of their room into the dark hall, were about to face a Sister of the Dark on a rampage. Those still asleep behind their doors would face no less.

Emmy cried out in pain. Kahlan knew why.

"Where is she?" Sister Ulicia yelled at the woman. "Where's Tovi?"

Emmy screamed, begging that her daughter not be harmed.

Kahlan knew that it was a grave tactical mistake to betray to an enemy what you feared most.

In this case, however, she supposed that such information was irrelevant; not only was it pretty obvious what a mother would fear, but the Sisters needed no such leverage. Seeing her mother in a state of unbridled terror was only serving to frighten the child all that much more. She struggled mightily. Despite her frantic effort, such a slender girl was no match for Kahlan.

Holding the girl tightly, Kahlan pulled her back through the doorway beside the stairs and into the darkened room beyond. In the flashes of lightning coming through a window at the rear, Kahlan saw that it was a kitchen and storage area for supplies.

The girl cried in wild panic that was the match of her mother's.

"It's all right," Kahlan whispered in the girl's ear as she held her tight, trying to calm her. "I'll protect you. It's all right."

Kahlan knew that it was a lie, but her heart would not allow the truth.

The slender slip of a girl pawed at Kahlan's arms. It must have seemed to her as if she were being held by a spirit clutching at her from the underworld. If she even saw Kahlan, Kahlan knew that the girl would forget her before her mind could transform perception into cognition. Likewise, Kahlan's words of comfort would evaporate from the girl's mind before they had a chance to even begin to be comprehended. Within an instant after seeing her, no one ever remembered that Kahlan existed.

Except Orlan. And now he was dead.

Kahlan hugged the terrified girl tight. She didn't know if it wasn't really more for her own sake than the girl's. At that moment, keeping the girl away from the terror of what was befalling her parents was all Kahlan could do. The girl, for her part, writhed madly in Kahlan's arms, trying to twist away, as if she were being held by a monster intent on bloody murder. Kahlan hated adding to her terror, but letting her go out into the other room would be worse.

Lightning flashed again, making Kahlan glance to the window. The window was large enough for her to get through. It was dark outside, and the dense forest lay tight up to the buildings. She had long legs. She was strong and quick. She knew that if she chose, she could, in a few heartbeats, be through the window and into the thick of the woods.

But she had tried to escape the Sisters before. She knew that neither night nor woods would conceal her from women with such dark talents. Kneeling there in the dark, her arms holding the girl in a tight embrace, Kahlan began to tremble. The mere contemplation of an attempt at escape was enough to make her brow bead in sweat for fear that such a notion would unleash within her the embedded constraints. Her head swam dizzily with the memory of past attempts, memories of

the agony. She couldn't take such suffering again—not when it was to no purpose. Escaping the Sisters was impossible.

When she glanced up, Kahlan saw the dark shadow of a Sister descending the stairs.

"Ulicia," the woman called out. It was Sister Cecilia's voice. "The rooms upstairs are all empty. There are no guests."

In the front room Sister Ulicia growled a dark curse.

The shadow of Sister Cecilia turned from the stairs to fill the doorway, like death itself turning its withering gaze on the living. Beyond, Emmy wailed and wept. In her confusion, grief, pain, and terror she was unable to answer Sister Ulicia's shouted questions.

"Do you want your mother to die?" Sister Cecilia asked from the doorway in that deadly calm voice of hers.

She was no less cruel or dangerous than Sister Armina, or Sister Ulicia, but she had a quiet, composed way of speaking that was somehow more terrifying than Sister Ulicia's screaming. Sister Armina's straightforward threats were simple and sincere but delivered with a bit more bile. Sister Tovi had a kind of sick glee in her approach to discipline and even torture. When any of them wanted something, though, Kahlan had long ago learned that to deny them would only bring nearly unimaginable suffering, and in the end what they had wanted in the first place.

"Do you?" Sister Cecilia repeated with calm directness.

"Answer her," Kahlan whispered in the girl's ear. "Please, answer her questions. Please."

"No," the girl managed.

"Then tell us where Tovi is."

In the room behind Sister Cecilia, the girl's mother gasped in a terrible rattle and then went silent. Kahlan heard bony thumps as the woman hit the wood floor. The house fell quiet.

From the dim, flickering light beyond the doorway, two more shadows glided up behind Sister Cecilia. Kahlan knew that Emmy would answer no more questions.

Sister Cecilia slipped into the room, closer to the girl Kahlan held tightly in her arms.

"The rooms are all empty. Why are there no guests in your inn?"

"None have come," the girl managed as she shook. "Word of the invaders from the Old World has scared people away."

Kahlan knew that that made sense. After leaving the People's Palace in D'Hara and swiftly traveling south through mostly remote country on a small riverboat, they still had encountered detachments of Emperor Jagang's troops more than once, or been through river settlements where those brutes had been. Word of such atrocities would have spread like an ill wind.

"Where is Tovi?" Sister Cecilia asked.

Holding the girl protectively away from the Sisters, Kahlan glared up at them. "She's just a child! Leave her be!"

A shock of pain slammed into her. It felt to Kahlan as if every fiber of every muscle had violently ripped. For an instant, she didn't know where she was or what was happening. The room spun. Her back hit the cupboards with bone-breaking force. Doors flew open. Pots, pans, and utensils cascaded out, bouncing and clattering across the wooden floor. Dishes and glasses shattered as they came crashing down.

Kahlan slammed facedown onto the floor. Jagged, broken shards of pottery slashed her palms as she tried unsuccessfully to break her fall. When she felt the end of something razor-sharp pressed against the side of her tongue in back she realized that a long sliver of glass had pierced her cheek. She clenched her jaw, snapping off the glass between her teeth so that it wouldn't slash open her tongue. With effort she managed to spit out the bloody, daggerlike piece of glass.

She lay sprawled on the floor, stunned, disoriented, unable to fully gather her senses. Grunts escaped her throat as she tried without success to move. She found that as those sounds slipped out, she couldn't draw a new breath back in. Each bit of air that escaped her lungs was a bit of air lost to her. Her muscles strained to pull the wind back into her lungs. The pain lancing through her middle was paralyzing, acting to counter her effort to get a breath.

In desperation she gasped, at last managing to pull in an urgent breath. She spat out more blood and sharp splinters of glass. She was just beginning to feel the twinge of pain from the fragment still stuck through her cheek. Kahlan couldn't

seem to make her arms work, couldn't lift herself up from the floor, much less reach up to pull out the piece of glass.

She turned her eyes upward. She could make out the dark forms of the Sisters closing in around the girl. They lifted her and shoved her back against a heavy butcher block standing in the center of the room. A Sister held each arm as Sister Ulicia squatted down before the girl to meet her panicked gaze.

"Do you know who Tovi is?"

"The old woman!" the girl cried out. "The old woman!"

"Yes, the old woman. What else do you know about her?"

The girl gulped air, almost unable to get the words out. "Big. She was big. Old and big. She was too big to walk real good."

Sister Ulicia leaned close, gripping the girl's slender throat. "Where is she? Why isn't she here? She was supposed to meet us here. Why is she gone?"

"Gone," the girl cried. "She's gone."

"Why? When was she here? When did she leave? Why did she leave?"

"A few days back. She was here. She stayed with us for a while. But she left a few days back."

Sister Ulicia, with a cry of rage, lifted the girl and heaved her against the wall. With all her effort, Kahlan struggled to her hands and knees. The girl crashed down to the floor. Ignoring how wobbly she felt, Kahlan crawled across the floor, across broken glass and pottery, and threw herself protectively across the girl's body. The girl, not knowing what was happening, cried out all the more.

Footsteps came toward her. Kahlan saw a cleaver lying on the floor nearby. The girl cried and struggled to get away, but Kahlan held her protectively against the floor.

As the shadows of the women came closer, Kahlan's fingers closed around the wooden handle of the heavy cleaver. She wasn't thinking, she was simply acting: threat, weapon. It was almost like watching someone else doing it.

But there was a kind of deep inner satisfaction at having a weapon in her hand. Her fist tightened around the blood-slicked

handle. A weapon was life. Flashes of lightning glinted off the steel.

When the women were close enough, Kahlan suddenly raised her arm to strike. Before she could begin to accomplish her task, she felt a gut-wrenching blow, as if she had been rammed by the butt end of a log. The power of that blow hurled her across the room.

A hard impact against the wall stunned her. The room seemed like it was far away, off at the far end of a long, dark tunnel. Pain swamped her. She tried to lift her head but couldn't. Darkness pulled her in.

The next time she opened her eyes, Kahlan saw the girl cringing before the Sisters as they towered over her.

"I don't know," the girl was saying. "I don't know why she left. She said she had to be on her way to Caska."

The room rang with silence.

"Caska?" Sister Armina finally asked.

"Yes, that's what she said. She had to get to Caska."

"Did she have anything with her?"

"With her?" the girl whined, still sobbing and shivering. "I don't understand. What do you mean, with her?"

"With her!" Sister Ulicia screamed. "What did she have with her? She had to be carrying things—a pack, a waterskin. But she had other things. Did you see anything else of what she had with her?"

When the girl hesitated, Sister Ulicia smacked her across the face hard enough to have loosened her teeth.

"Did you see anything she had with her?"

A long string of blood from the girl's nose lay horizontally across her cheek. "When she was at supper one day, I went to take her clean towels and I saw something in her room. Something strange."

Sister Cecilia leaned down. "Strange? Like what?"

"It was, it was like a . . . a box. She had it wrapped in a white dress, but the dress was silky smooth and it had partly slipped off the box. It was like a box—only it was all black. But not black like paint. It was black like night itself. Black like it would take the light right out of the day."

The three Sisters straightened and stood in silence.

Kahlan knew exactly what the girl was talking about. Kahlan had gone in and taken all three of those boxes from the Garden of Life in the People's Palace—from Lord Rahl's palace.

When she had brought the first one out, Sister Ulicia had been furious at Kahlan for not bringing all three of them out at once, but they were larger than expected and there had been no room to hide them all in her pack, so Kahlan had at first brought out only one. Sister Ulicia had wrapped that vile thing in Kahlan's white dress and had given it to Tovi, telling her to hurry and be on her way, that they would all meet up later. Sister Ulicia hadn't wanted to risk getting caught in the palace with one of the three boxes and so she hadn't wanted Sister Tovi to wait while Kahlan went back up into the Garden of Life after the other two boxes.

"Why did Tovi go to Caska?" Sister Ulicia asked.

"I don't know," the girl wept. "I don't know, I swear I don't. I only know that I heard her say to my parents that she had to be on her way to Caska. She left a few days back."

In the quiet, lying against the floor, Kahlan struggled to breathe. Each breath sent agonizing stitches of pain through her ribs. She knew that it was only going to be the beginning of the pain. When the Sisters finished with the girl they would turn their attention to Kahlan.

"Maybe we had better get some sleep in out of the rain," Sister Armina finally suggested. "We can start out early."

Sister Ulicia, her fist with the dacra on her hip, paced between the girl and the butcher block, thinking. Shards of pottery crunched under her boots.

"No," she said as she turned back to the others. "Something is wrong."

"You mean with the spell-form? You mean because of the man?"

Sister Ulicia waved a hand dismissively. "An anomaly. Nothing more. No, something is wrong about the rest of it. Why would Tovi leave? She had explicit instructions to meet us here. And she was here—but then she leaves. There were no other guests, no Imperial Order troops in the area, she

knew we were on our way, and yet she leaves. It makes no sense."

"And why Caska?" Sister Cecilia asked. "Why would she head for Caska?"

Sister Ulicia turned back to the girl. "Who visited Tovi while she was here? Who came to see her?"

"I already told you, no one. No one at all came here while the old woman was staying with us. We had no other callers or guests. She was the only one here. This place is out of the way. People don't come here for stretches."

Sister Ulicia went back to her pacing. "I don't like it. Something is wrong about this, but I can't put my finger on it."

"I agree," Sister Cecilia said. "Tovi wouldn't just leave."

"And yet she did. Why?" Sister Ulicia came to a stop before the girl. "Did she say anything else, or leave a message—perhaps a letter?"

The girl, sniffling back a sob, shook her head.

"We have no choice," Sister Ulicia muttered. "We're going to have to follow Tovi to Caska."

Sister Armina gestured toward the front door. "Tonight? In the rain? Don't you think we ought to wait until morning?"

Sister Ulicia, deep in thought, looked up at the woman. "What if someone shows up? We don't need any more complications if we're to accomplish our task. We certainly don't need Jagang or his troops getting a whiff of us being about. We need to get to Tovi and we need to get that box—we all know what's at stake." She took the measure of both women's grave expressions before going on. "What we don't need are any witnesses who can report that we were here and what we're looking for."

Kahlan knew very well what Sister Ulicia was getting at.

"Please," she managed as she pushed herself up on shaky arms, "please, leave her be. She's just a little girl. She doesn't know anything of any value to anyone."

"She knows Tovi was here. She knows what Tovi has with her." Sister Ulicia's brow drew tight with displeasure. "She knows we were here looking for her."

Kahlan struggled to put force into her voice. "She is nothing

to you. You're sorceresses; she is but a child. She can do you no harm."

Sister Ulicia glanced briefly over her shoulder at the girl. "She also knows where we're going."

Sister Ulicia looked deliberately into Kahlan's eyes. Without turning to the girl behind her, and with sudden force, she slammed her dacra back into the girl's midsection.

The girl gasped in shock.

Still staring down at Kahlan, Sister Ulicia smiled at such a deed as only evil could smile. Kahlan thought that this must be what it would be like looking into the eyes of the Keeper of the Dead in his lair in the darkest depths of the eternity of the underworld.

Sister Ulicia arched an eyebrow. "I don't intend to leave any loose ends."

Light seemed to flash from within the girl's wide eyes. She went slack and fell heavily to the floor. Her arms sprawled out at crazy angles. Her lifeless gaze stared fixedly right at Kahlan as if to denounce her for not keeping her word.

Her promise to the girl—*I'll protect you*—rang through Kahlan's mind.

She cried out in helpless fury as she pounded her fists against the floor.

And then she cried out in sudden pain as she was flung back against the wall. Rather than crash to the floor, she stuck there as if held by a great strength. The strength, she knew, was magic.

She couldn't breathe. One of the Sisters was using her power to constrict Kahlan's throat. She strained, trying to get air, as she clawed at the iron collar around her neck.

Sister Ulicia approached and put her face close to Kahlan's.

"You are lucky this day," she said in a venomous voice. "We don't have time to make you regret your disobedience—not right now, anyway. But don't think that you are going to get away with it without suffering the consequences."

"No, Sister," Kahlan managed to say with great effort. She knew that not to answer would only make it worse yet.

"I guess that you're simply too stupid to comprehend how

insignificant and powerless you are in the face of your betters. Perhaps this time, when you are given another lesson, even one as lowly and ignorant as you will understand it."

"Yes, Sister."

Even though she knew quite well what they would make her endure to teach her that lesson, Kahlan would have done the same thing again. She regretted only failing to protect the girl, as she had promised. The day she had taken those three boxes out of Lord Rahl's palace, she had left in their place her most prized possession: a small statue of a proud woman, her fists at her side, her back arched, and her head thrown back as if facing forces that would subdue her but could not.

Kahlan had gathered strength that day in Richard Rahl's palace. Standing in his garden, looking back at the proud statue she'd had to leave there, Kahlan had sworn that she would have her life back. Having her life back meant fighting for life, even if it was the life of a little girl she didn't know.

"Let's go," Sister Ulicia growled as she marched toward the door, expecting everyone to follow.

Kahlan's boots thumped down on the floor when the force pressing her to the wall abruptly released her.

She collapsed to her knees, her bloody hands comforting her throat as she gasped for air. Her fingers encountered the hated collar by which the Sisters controlled her.

"Move!" Sister Cecilia ordered in a tone that had Kahlan scrambling to her feet.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw the poor girl's dead eyes staring at her, watching her go.