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The Magician's Apprentice

Trudi Canavan

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Extract

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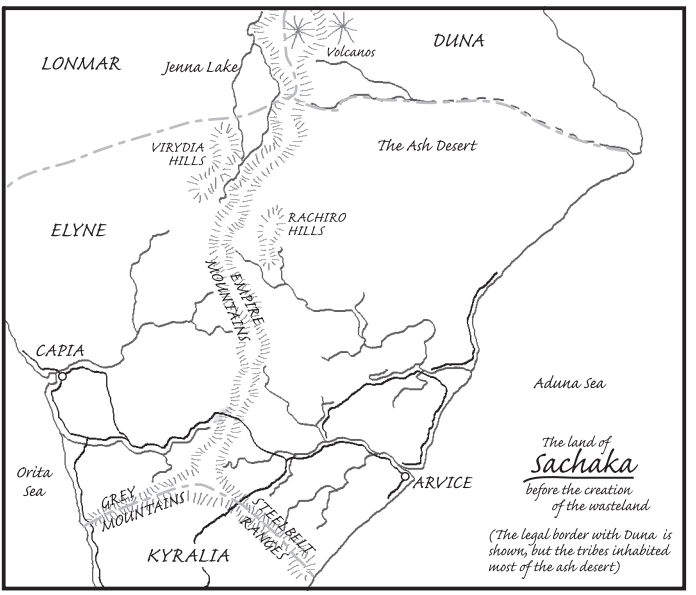
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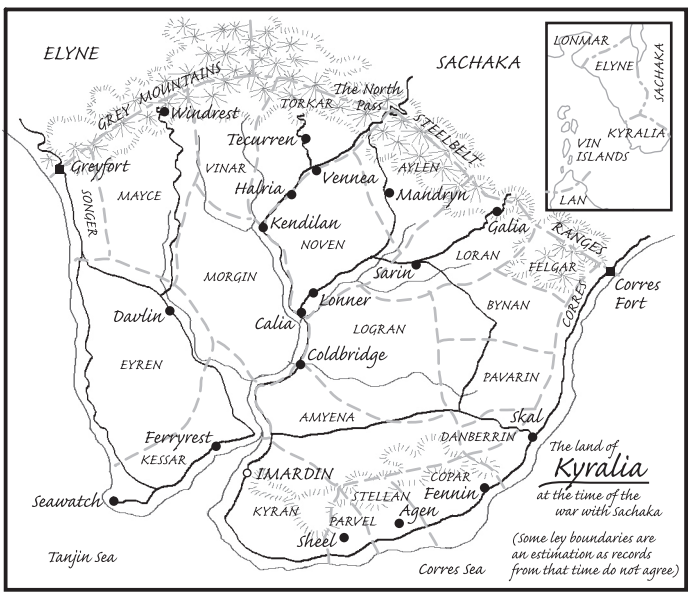


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LONMAR
Jenna Lake
Volcanos
DUNA
VIRYDIA HILLS
The Ash Desert
ELYNE
RACHIRO HILLS
EMPIRE MOUNTAINS
CAPIA
Aduna Sea
The land of
Sachaka
before the creation of the wasteland
Orita Sea
GREY MOUNTAINS
STEELBELT RANGES
ARVICE
KYRALIA
(The legal border with Duna is shown, but the tribes inhabited most of the ash desert)


ELYNE
SACHAKA
LONMAR
ELYNE
SACHAKA
KYRALIA
VIN ISLANDS
LAN
GREY MOUNTAINS
Windrest
TORKAR
The North Pass
STEELBELT
Tecurren
Greyfort
VINAR
AYLEN
Vennea
Halria
Mandryn
MAYCE
SONGER
Kendilan
NOVEN
Galia
RANGES
LORAN
FELGAR
Sarin
MORGIN
Corres Fort
CORREN
Lonner
BYNAN
Dawlin
Calia
LOGRAN
Coldbridge
EYREN
PAVARIN
AMYENA
Skal
DANBERRIN
Ferryrest
KESSAR
The land of
Kyralia
at the time of the war with Sachaka
IMARDIN
COPAR
Fennin
Seawatch
STELEAN
KYRAN
Agen
PARVEL
Sheel
Tanjin Sea
Corres Sea
(Some ley boundaries are an estimation as records from that time do not agree)

"Found a book describing the Sachakan War written soon after the event. It is remarkable in that it portrays the Guild as the enemy – and it paints an unflattering image indeed!"

Letter from Lord Dannyl to Administrator Lorlen

"The history of magic is a tale of accidental discoveries and deliberate concealments It would be impossible to write an accurate history of magic without scraping away the dirt under which unpalatable facts have long been buried. Twenty years ago the Guild was scandalised to discover that what we know as 'black magic' was once called 'higher magic' and was practised by all magicians – who were all known as Higher Magicians. It was as much a shock to learn this as to comprehend that so much of our recorded history has been altered and destroyed. But there are stranger truths to be uncovered. I have unearthed no mention of the destruction of Imardin in the accounts of the Sachakan War, for instance. Yet it is an accepted part of our basic historical teachings. And the greatest mystery of all is how the wastelands of Sachaka were created. The people of that land hold the Guild responsible for that terrible act. Yet no record has ever been found to explain how it was done."

Extract from the preface of Lord Dannyl's
A Complete History of Magic

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

There was no fast and painless way to perform an amputation, Tessia knew. Not if you did it properly. A neat amputation required a flap of skin to be cut to cover the stump, and that took time.

As her father deftly began to slice into the skin around the boy's finger, Tessia noted the expressions of the people in the room. The boy's father stood with his arms crossed and his back straight. His scowl did not quite hide signs of worry, though whether it was sympathy for his son or anxiety about whether he'd get the harvest finished in time without his son's help, she could not tell. Probably a bit of both.

The mother held her son's other hand tightly while staring into his eyes. The boy's face was flushed and beaded with sweat. His jaw was clenched and, despite her father's warning, he watched the work being done intently. He had remained still so far, not moving his wounded hand or squirming. No sound had escaped him. Such control impressed Tessia, especially in one so young. Landworkers were said to be a tough lot, but in her experience that was not always true. She wondered if the child would be able to keep it up. Worse was to come, after all.

Her father's face was creased with concentration. He had carefully peeled the skin of the boy's finger back past the joint of the knuckle. At a glance from him she took the small jointer knife from the burner and handed it to him, then took the number five peeler from him, washed it and carefully set the blade over the burner so it would be seared clean.

When she looked up, the boy's face was a mass of wrinkles, screwed up tight. Tessia's father had begun to cut through the

joint. Looking up, she noted that the boy's father was now a pasty grey. The mother was white.

"Don't watch," Tessia advised in a murmur. The woman's head turned abruptly away.

The blade met the surgery board with a clunk of finality. Taking the small jointer from her father, Tessia handed him a curved needle, already threaded with fine gut-string. The needle glided easily through the boy's skin and Tessia felt a little glow of pride; she had sharpened it carefully in readiness for this operation, and the gut-string was the finest she had ever fashioned.

She looked at the amputated finger lying at the end of the surgery board. At one end it was a blackened, oozing mess, but there was reassuringly healthy flesh all through the cut end. It had been badly crushed in an accident during harvest some days before, but like most of the villagers and land-workers her father serviced, neither boy nor father had sought help until the wound had festered. It took time, and extreme pain, before a person could accept, let alone seek, removal of a part of their body.

If left too long, such a festering could poison the blood, causing fevers and even death. That a small wound could prove fatal fascinated Tessia. It also scared her. She had seen a man driven to insanity and self-mutilation by a mere rotten tooth, otherwise robust women bleed to death after giving birth, healthy babies that stopped breathing for no apparent reason and fevers that spread through the village, taking one or two lives but causing no more than discomfort for the rest.

Through working with her father, she had seen more wounds, illness and death in her sixteen years than most women did in their lifetimes. But she had also seen maladies remedied, chronic illness relieved and lives saved. She knew every man, woman and child in the village and the ley, and some beyond. She had knowledge of matters that few were privy to. Unlike most of the locals she could read and write, reason and—

Her father looked up and handed her the needle, then cut off the remaining thread. Neat stitches held the flap of skin closed

over the stump of the boy's finger. Knowing what came next, Tessia took some wadding and bandages from his healer's bag and handed them to him.

"Take these," he told the mother.

Letting the boy's other hand go, the woman passively let Tessia's father lay the bandage across one palm, then arrange wadding on top. He placed the boy's hand over her palm so the stump of the finger rested in the centre of the wadding, then took hold of the pulse binder on the boy's arm.

"When I loosen this the blood in his arm will regain its rhythm," he told her. "His finger will begin to bleed. You must wrap the wadding around the finger and hold it firmly until the blood finds a new pulse path."

The woman bit her lip and nodded. As Tessia's father loosened the binder the boy's arm and hand slowly regained a healthy pinkness. Blood welled around the stitches and the mother quickly wrapped her hand around the stump. The boy grimaced. She smoothed his hair affectionately.

Tessia suppressed a smile. Her father had taught her that it was wise to allow a family to take part in the healing process in some small way. It gave them a sense of control, and they were less likely to be suspicious or dismissive of the methods he used if they took part in them.

After a little wait, her father checked the stump then bound it up firmly, giving the family instructions on how often to replace the bandages, how to keep them clean and dry if the boy resumed work (he knew better than to tell them to keep the boy at home), when they could be discarded, and what signs of festering they should watch for.

As he listed off the medicines and extra bandages they would need, Tessia removed them from his bag and set them on the cleanest patch of the table that she could find. The amputated finger she wrapped up and set aside. Patients and their families preferred to bury or burn such things, perhaps worrying what might be done with them if they didn't dispose of them themselves. No doubt they had heard the disturbing and ridiculous stories that went around from time to time of healers in Kyralia

secretly experimenting on amputated limbs, grinding bones up into unnatural potions or somehow reanimating them.

Cleaning and then searing the needle over the burner, she packed it and the other tools away. The surgery board would have to be treated later, at home. She extinguished the burner and waited as the family began to offer their thanks.

This was also a well-practised part of their routine. Her father hated being trapped while patients poured out their gratitude. It embarrassed him. After all, he was not offering his services for free. Lord Dakon provided him and his family with a house and income in exchange for looking after the people of his ley.

But her father knew that accepting thanks with humility and patience kept him well placed in the local people's opinions. He never accepted gifts, however. Everyone under Lord Dakon's rule paid a tithe to their master, and so in effect had already paid Tessia's father for his services.

Her role was to wait for the right moment to interrupt and remind her father that they had other work to do. The family would apologise. Her father would apologise. Then they would be ushered out.

But as the right moment neared the sound of hoofbeats drummed outside the house. All paused to listen. The hoofbeats stopped and were replaced by footsteps, then a pounding at the door.

"Healer Veran? Is Healer Veran there?"

The farmer and Tessia's father started forward at the same time, then her father stopped, allowing the man to answer his own door. A well-dressed middle-aged man stood outside, his brow slick with sweat. Tessia recognised him as Lord Dakon's house master, Keron.

"He's here," the farmer told him.

Keron squinted into the dimness of the farmer's house. "Your services are required at the Residence, Healer Veran. With some urgency."

Tessia's father frowned, then turned to beckon to her. Grabbing his bag and the burner, she hurried after him into the daylight. One of the farmer's older sons was waiting by the horse and cart provided by Lord Dakon for her father to use when visiting patients

outside the village, and he quickly rose and removed a feedbag from the old mare's head. Tessia's father nodded his thanks then took his bag from Tessia and stowed it in the back of the cart.

As they climbed up onto the seat, Keron galloped past them back towards the village. Her father took up the reins and flicked them. The mare snorted and shook her head, then started forward.

Tessia glanced at her father. "Do you think . . . ?" she began, then stopped as she realised the pointlessness of her question.

Do you think it might have something to do with the Sachakan? she had wanted to ask, but such questions were a waste of breath. They would find out when they got there.

It was hard not to imagine the worst. The villagers hadn't stopped muttering about the foreign magician visiting Lord Dakon's house since he had arrived, and it was hard not to be infected by their fear and awe. Though Lord Dakon was a magician, he was familiar, respected and Kyralian. If he was feared it was only because of the magic he could wield and the control over their lives he held; he was not the sort of landowner who misused either power. Sachakan magicians on the other hand had, scant centuries ago, ruled and enslaved Kyralia and by all reports liked to remind people, whenever the chance came, what things had been like before Kyralia was granted its independence.

Think like a healer, she told herself as the cart bounced down the road. *Consider the information you have. Trust reason over emotion*.

Neither the Sachakan nor Lord Dakon could be ill. Both were magicians and resistant to all but a few rare maladies. They weren't immune to plagues, but rarely succumbed to them. Lord Dakon would have called on her father for help long before any disease needed urgent attention, though it was possible the Sachakan wouldn't have mentioned being ill if he didn't want to be tended by a Kyralian healer.

Magicians could die of wounds, she knew. Lord Dakon could have injured himself. Then an even more frightening possibility occurred to her. Had Lord Dakon and the Sachakan fought each other?

If they had, the lord's house – and perhaps the village, too – would be ruined and smoking, she told herself, *if the tales of what magical battles are like are true*. The road descending from the farmer's

home gave a clear view of the houses below, lining either side of the main road this side of the river. All was as peaceful and undisturbed as it had been when they had left.

Perhaps the patient or patients they were hurrying to treat were servants in the lord's house. Aside from Keron, six other house and stable servants kept Lord Dakon's home in order. She and her father had treated them many times before. Landworkers living outside the village sometimes travelled to the Residence when they were sick or injured, though usually they went directly to her father.

Who else is there? Ah, of course. There's Jayan, Lord Dakon's apprentice, she remembered. *But as far as I know he has all the same physical protections against illness as a higher magician. Perhaps he picked a fight with the Sachakan. To the Sachakan, Jayan would be the closest thing to a slave, and—.*

"Tessia."

She looked at her father expectantly. Had he anticipated who needed his services?

"I . . . Your mother wants you to stop assisting me."

Anticipation shrivelled into exasperation. "I know." She grimaced. "She wants me to find a nice husband and start having babies."

He didn't smile, as he had in the past when the subject came up. "Is that so bad? You can't become a healer, Tessia."

Hearing the serious tone in his voice, she stared at him in surprise and disappointment. While her mother had expressed this opinion many times before, her father had never agreed with it. She felt something inside her turn to stone and fall down into her gut, where it lay cold and hard and uncomfortable. Which was impossible, of course. Human organs did not turn to stone and certainly could not shift into the stomach.

"The villagers won't accept you," he continued.

"You can't know that," she protested. "Not until I've tried and failed. What reason could they have to distrust me?"

"None. They like you well enough, but it is as hard for them to believe that a woman can heal as that a reber could sprout wings and fly. It's not in a woman's nature to have a steady head, they think."

"But the birthmothers . . . they trust them. Why is there any difference between that and healing?"

"Because what we . . . what the birthmothers do is specialised and limited. Remember, they call for my help when their knowledge is insufficient. A healer has learning and experience behind him that no birthmother has access to. Most birthmothers can't even read."

"And yet the villagers trust them. Sometimes they trust them more than you."

"Birthing is an entirely female activity," he said wryly. "Healing isn't."

Tessia could not speak. Annoyance and frustration rose inside her but she knew angry outbursts would not help her cause. She had to be persuasive, and her father was no simple peasant who might be easily swayed. He was probably the smartest man in the village.

As the cart reached the main road she cursed silently. She had not realised how firmly he'd come to agree with her mother. *I need to change his mind back again, and I need to do it carefully*, she realised. *He doesn't like to go against Mother's wishes. So I need to weaken her confidence in her arguments as much as reduce Father's doubts about continuing to teach me.* She needed to consider all the arguments for and against her becoming a healer, and how to use them to her benefit. And she needed to know every detail of her parents' plans.

"What will you do without me assisting you?" she asked.

"I'll take on a boy from the village," her father said.

"Which one?"

"Perhaps Miller's youngest. He is a bright child."

So he'd already been considering the matter. She felt a stab of hurt.

The well-maintained main road was less rutted than the farmer's track, so her father flicked the reins and urged the mare to quicken her pace. The increased vibration of the cart robbed Tessia of the ability to think. She saw faces appear in windows as they reached the village. The few people walking about stopped, acknowledging her father with nods and smiles.

She gripped the rail as her father tugged on the reins to slow the mare and turn her through the gates at one side of the lord's

Residence. In the dim light of the building's shadows she made out stable workers coming forward to take the reins as the cart stopped. Her father jumped down from the seat. Keron stepped forward to take her father's bag. She leapt down to the ground and hurried after as they disappeared into the house.

Tessia caught glimpses of the kitchen, storeroom, washroom and other practical spaces through the doorways of the corridor they strode down. Their rapid footsteps echoed in the narrow stairwell as they climbed up to the floor above. A few turns later and she found herself in a part of the building she had never seen before. Tastefully decorated walls and fine furniture suggested a living area, but these were not the rooms she had seen a few years before, when her father had been summoned to tend a rather vapid young woman suffering from a fainting fit. There were a few bedrooms, and a seating room, and she guessed these were rooms for guests.

She was surprised, then, when Keron opened a door and ushered them into a small room furnished with only a plain bed and a narrow table. No windows let in light, so a tiny lamp burned in the room. It felt mean and dingy. She looked at the bed and suddenly all thought of the décor left her mind.

A man lay there, his face bruised and swollen so badly one eye was a bloodied, compressed slit. The white of the other eye was dark. She suspected it would appear red in better light. His lips did not line up properly, possibly indicating a broken jaw. His face seemed broad and strangely shaped, though that might have been an effect of the injuries.

He also cradled his right hand to his chest, and she saw instantly that the forearm bent in a way it shouldn't. His chest, too, was dark with bruises. All he wore was a pair of short, tattered trousers that had been roughly mended in many places. His skin was deeply tanned and his build was slight. His feet were bare, and black with dirt. One ankle was badly swollen. The calf of the other leg looked slightly crooked, as if it had healed badly after a break.

The room was silent but for the man's rapid, laboured breathing. Tessia recognised the sound and felt her stomach sink. Her father had once treated a man whose ribs had been broken, puncturing his lungs. That man had died.

Her father hadn't moved since entering the room. He stood still, back slightly bent, gazing at the beaten, broken figure on the bed.

"Father," she ventured.

With a jerk, he straightened and turned to look at her. As he met her eyes she felt understanding pass between them. She found herself shaking her head slightly, and realised he was doing the same. Then she smiled. Surely at moments like these, when they did not even need to speak to understand each other, he could see that she was meant to follow in his footsteps?

He frowned and looked down, then turned back to the bed. She felt a sudden, painful loss. What he should have done was smile, or nod, or give her some sign of reassurance that they would continue working together.

I must regain his confidence, she thought. She took her father's bag from Keron, placed it on the narrow table and opened it. Taking out the burner, she lit it and adjusted the flame. Footsteps sounded outside the room.

"We need more light," her father muttered.

Abruptly the room was filled with a dazzling white light. Tessia ducked as a ball of brightness moved past her head. She stared at it and immediately regretted doing so. It was too bright. When she looked away a circular shadow obscured her sight.

"Is that enough?" a strangely accented voice asked.

"I thank you, master," she heard her father say respectfully.

Master? Tessia felt her stomach spasm. Only one person currently staying in the Residence would be addressed so by her father. Yet with the realisation came a feeling of rebellion. *I will not show this Sachakan any fear*, she decided. *Though I guess there's no risk of trembling at the sight of anyone when I can't actually see properly.* She rubbed at her eyes. The dark patch was receding as her eyes recovered. Squinting at the doorway, she realised there were two figures standing there.

"How do you rate his chances, Healer Veran?" a more familiar voice asked.

Her father hesitated before answering. "Low, my lord," he admitted. "His lungs are pierced. Such an injury is usually fatal."

"Do what you can," Lord Dakon instructed.

Tessia could just make out the two magicians' faces now. Lord Dakon's expression was grim. His companion was smiling. She could see enough to make out his broad Sachakan features, the elaborately decorated jacket and pants he wore, and the jewelled knife in its sheath on his belt that Sachakans wore to indicate they were magicians. Lord Dakon said something quietly, and the pair moved out of sight. She heard their footsteps receding down the corridor beyond.

Abruptly, the light blinked out, leaving them in darkness. Tessia heard her father curse under his breath. Then the room brightened again, though not so fiercely. She looked up to see Keron step inside carrying two full-sized lamps.

"Ah, thank you," Tessia's father said. "Place them over here, and here."

"Is there anything else you require?" the servant asked. "Water? Cloth?"

"At the moment what I need more than anything else is information. How did this happen?"

"I'm . . . I'm not sure. I did not witness it."

"Did anyone? It is easy to miss an injury when there are so many. A description of where each blow fell—"

"Nobody saw," the man said quickly. "None but Lord Dakon, this slave and his master."

Slave? Tessia looked down at the injured man. Of course. The tanned skin and broad features were typically Sachakan. Suddenly the Sachakan magician's interest made sense.

Her father sighed. "Then fetch us some water, and I will write a list of supplies for you to collect from my wife."

The house master hurried away. Tessia's father looked at her, his expression grim. "It will be a long night for you and me." He smiled faintly. "I have to wonder, at times like these, if you are tempted by your mother's vision of your future."

"At times like these it never crosses my mind," she told him. Then she added quietly, "This time we may succeed."

His eyes widened, then his shoulders straightened a little.

"Let's get started, then."

CHAPTER 2

Playing host to a Sachakan magician was never easy and rarely pleasant. Of all the tasks required of Lord Dakon's servants, feeding their guest had caused the most distress. If Ashaki Takado was served a dish he recognised as one he'd eaten before he would reject it, even if he had enjoyed it. He disliked most dishes and he had a large appetite, so at each meal many, many more courses had to be prepared than were normally required to feed two people.

The reward for enduring the fussiness of this guest was a great surfeit of food, which was shared among the household afterwards. *If Takado stays for many more weeks I will not be surprised to find my servants have begun to get a little rotund*, Dakon mused. *Still, I am sure they would much rather the Sachakan moved on.*

As would I, he added to himself as his guest leaned back, patted his broad girth and belched. *Preferably back to his homeland, which I presume is where he is heading since he has travelled through most of Kyralia and this is the closest Residence to the pass.*

"An excellent meal," Takado announced. "Did I detect a little bellspice in that last dish?"

Dakon nodded. "An advantage to living close to the border is that Sachakan traders occasionally pass this way."

"I'm surprised they do. Mandryn isn't on the direct road to Imardin."

"No, but occasionally spring floods block the main road and the best alternative route brings traffic right through the village." He wiped his mouth on a cloth. "Shall we retire to the seating room?"

As Takado nodded, Dakon heard a faint sigh of relief from Cannia, who was on duty in the dining room tonight. *At least*

the servants' trials are over for the evening, Dakon thought wearily as he stood up. *Mine don't end until the man sleeps*.

Takado rose and stepped away from the table. He was a full head taller than Dakon, and his broad shoulders and wide face added to the impression of bulk. Beneath a layer of soft fat was the frame of a typical Sachakan – strong and big. Next to Takado, Dakon knew he must appear pathetically thin and small. And pale. While not as dark as the Lonmars of the north, Sachakan skin was a healthy brown that Kyralian women had been trying to achieve with paints for centuries.

Which they still did, despite otherwise loathing and fearing the Sachakans. Dakon led the way out of the room. *They should be proud of their complexion, but centuries of believing our pallor is evidence that we are a weak, barbaric race can't be turned around easily*.

He entered the seating room, Takado following and dropping into the chair he'd claimed as his own for the duration of his stay. The room was illuminated by two lamps. Though he could easily have lit the room with a magical light, Dakon preferred the warm glow of lamplight. It reminded him of his mother, who'd had no magical talent and preferred to do things "the old-fashioned way". She'd also decorated and furnished the seating room. After another Sachakan visitor, impressed with the library, had decided that Dakon's father would gift him with several valuable books, she had decreed that such visitors be entertained in a room that appeared full of priceless treasures, but actually contained copies, fakes or inexpensive knick-knacks.

Takado stretched his legs and watched Dakon pour wine from a jug the servants had left for them. "So, Lord Dakon, do you think your healer can save my slave?"

Dakon detected no concern in the man's voice. He hadn't expected care for the slave's well-being – just the sort of interest a man has in a belonging that has broken and is being repaired. "Healer Veran will do the best he can."

"And if he fails, how will you punish him?"

Dakon handed Takado a goblet. "I won't."

Takado's eyebrows rose. "How do you know he will do his best, then?"

"Because I trust him. He is a man of honour."

"He is a Kyralian. My slave is valuable to me, and I am Sachakan. How do I know he won't hasten the man's death to spite me?"

Dakon sat down and took a sip of the wine. It wasn't a good vintage. His ley didn't enjoy a climate favourable for winemaking. But it was strong, and would speed the Sachakan towards retiring for the night. Dakon doubted it would loosen the man's tongue, though. It hadn't on any of the previous evenings.

"Because he is a man of honour," Dakon repeated.

The Sachakan snorted. "Honour! Among servants? If I were you, I'd take the daughter. She's not so ugly, for a Kyralian. She'll have picked up a few healing tricks, so she'd be a useful slave, too."

Dakon smiled. "Surely you have noticed during your journeying that slavery is outlawed in Kyralia."

Takado's nose wrinkled. "Oh, I couldn't help but notice. Nobody could fail to see how badly your servants attend to their masters. Surly. Stupid. Clumsy. It wasn't always that way, you know. Your people once embraced slavery as if it was their own idea. They could again, too. You might regain the prosperity your great-grandfathers enjoyed." He downed the wine in a few gulps and then sighed appreciatively.

"We've enjoyed greater prosperity since outlawing slavery than we ever had before," Dakon told his guest as he rose to refill the Sachakan's goblet and top up his own. "Keeping slaves isn't profitable. Treat them badly and they die before they become useful, or else rebel or run away. Treat them well and they cost as much to feed and control as free servants, yet have no motivation to work well."

"No motivation but fear of punishment or death."

"An injured or dead slave is of no use to anyone. I can't see how beating a slave to death for stepping on your foot is going to encourage him to be careful in the future. His death won't even be an example to others, since there are no other slaves here to learn from it."

Takado swirled the wine in his goblet, his expression unreadable.

"I probably went a bit too far. Trouble is, after travelling with him for months I've grown utterly sick of his company. You would, too, if you were restricted to one servant when you visited a country. I'm sure whichever of your kings came up with that law only wanted to punish Sachakans."

"Happy servants make better companions," Dakon said. "I enjoy conversing and dealing with my people, and they don't seem to mind talking to and working for me. If they didn't like me, they wouldn't alert me to potential problems in the ley, or suggest ways to increase crop yield."

"If my slaves didn't alert me to problems in my domain or get the best out of my crops, I'd have them killed."

"And then their skills would be lost. My people live longer and so gain proficiency in their work. They take pride in it, and are more likely to be innovative and inventive – like the healer tending your slave."

"But not like his daughter," Takado said. "Her skill will be wasted, won't it? She is a woman and in Kyralia women do not become healers. In my country her skills would be utilised." He leaned towards Dakon. "If you let me buy her off you, I'll make sure she gets to use them. I suspect she'd welcome the chance." He took a swig of the wine, watching Dakon over the rim of the goblet.

For a greedy, cruel man with too much power and too little self-restraint, Takado can be disturbingly perceptive, Dakon noted. "Even if I would not be breaking a law, and she agreed to such a thing, I don't think it's her healing skills you're interested in."

Takado laughed and relaxed in his chair. "You've seen through me once again, Lord Dakon. I expect you haven't tasted that dish – or have you?"

"Of course not. She is half my age."

"Which only makes her more appealing."

Takado was goading him again, Dakon knew. "And more likely that such a liaison would make me look a fool."

"There's no shame in seeking a little entertainment while looking for a suitable wife," Takado said. "I'm surprised you haven't found yourself one yet – a wife, that is. I suppose there

aren't any females in Aylen ley worthy of your status. You should visit Imardin more often. Looks like everything worth being a part of happens there."

"It has been too long since I visited," Dakon agreed. He sipped the wine. "Did you enjoy your stay there?"

Takado shrugged. "I don't know if I'd use the word 'enjoy'. It was as barbaric a place as I expected."

"If you didn't expect to enjoy it, why did you go?"

The Sachakan's eyes gleamed and he held out his empty goblet again. "To satisfy my curiosity."

Dakon rose to refill it. Every time they came close to discussing why Takado had toured Kyralia the Sachakan became flippant or changed the subject. It had made some magicians nervous, especially since rumours had reached them that some of the younger Sachakan magicians had met in Arvice, the capital of Sachaka, to discuss whether regaining the empire's former colonies was possible. The Kyralian king had sent secret requests to all landowners that any lord or lady Takado stayed with seek the reason for his visit.

"So has your curiosity been satisfied?" Dakon asked as he returned to his seat.

Takado shrugged. "There's more I'd like to see, but without a slave . . . ? No."

"Your slave might yet live."

"Much as I have appreciated your hospitality, I'm not going to stay here only to see whether a slave I'm tired of recovers. I've probably been too great a drain on your resources already." He paused to drink. "No, if he lives, keep him. He'll probably be crippled and useless."

Dakon blinked in surprise. "So if he lives and I allow him to stay, you grant him his freedom?"

"Yes. Of course." Takado waved a hand dismissively. "Can't have you breaking your own laws because of me."

"I thank you for your consideration. So where will you go next? Home?"

The Sachakan nodded, then grinned. "Can't let the slaves back in my domain get any foolish ideas about who is in control, can I?"

"Absence, as they say, tempers the bonds of affection."

Takado laughed. "You have some strange sayings here in Kyralia. Like 'Sleep is the cheapest tonic'." He stood and, as Dakon followed suit, handed over his empty wine goblet. "You haven't finished yours," he noted.

"As you are no doubt aware, small bodies make for quick drunks." Dakon set his half-empty goblet next to the empty one on the tray. "And while there is an injured man in my house I feel a responsibility to remain sober, even when that man is only a lowly Sachakan slave."

Takado's stare was somewhere between blank and amused. "You Kyralians are truly a strange people." He turned away. "No need to escort me to my room. I remember the way." He swayed slightly. "At least, I think I remember. Good night, Lord Dakon, as you strange Kyralians say."

"Good night, Ashaki Takado," Dakon replied.

He watched the Sachakan stroll down the corridor, and listened to the man's footsteps receding. Then he followed as silently as he could manage. Not to make sure that his guest went where he intended, but because he wanted to check on Veran's progress. The slave's room was, naturally, not far from his master's and Dakon did not want the Sachakan noticing where he was going, and deciding to accompany him.

A few corridors and a stairway later Dakon watched as Takado walked past the door to his slave's room without glancing at it, and disappeared into his own chamber. Muffled sounds came from within the slave's room. The light spilling under the door flickered. Dakon paused, reconsidering whether he should interrupt.

The slave will either live or he won't, he told himself; *it won't make any difference whether you visit or not.* But he could not find the cold practicality with which Takado regarded all but the most powerful of humans. Memories of the slave pinned to a wall, recoiling from relentless invisible blows dealt by the Sachakan magician, made Dakon shudder. He could still hear the crunch of breaking bones, the slap of impacts upon vulnerable flesh.

Turning away, he headed towards his own apartments, trying not to hope that Veran would fail.

Because what in the name of higher magic was he going to do with a freed Sachakan slave?

Early morning light illuminated the village when Tessia and her father emerged from Lord Dakon's house. It was a thin, cold glow, but when she turned to look at her father she knew the greyness of his face was not just a trick of the light. He was exhausted.

Their home was across the road and along it for hundred steps or so, yet the distance seemed enormous. It would have been ridiculous to ask the stable workers to hitch a horse to the cart for such a short journey, but she was so tired she wished someone had. Her father's shoe clipped a stone and she tucked an arm round his to steady him, her other hand gripping the handle of his bag. It felt heavier than it ever had before, even though most of the bandages and a substantial amount of the medicines usually contained within it were now wrapped around or applied to various parts of the Sachakan slave's body.

That poor man. Her father had cut him open in order to remove the broken piece of rib from his lung and sew up the hole. Such drastic surgery should have killed the fellow, but somehow he had continued to breathe and live. Her father had said it was pure luck the incision he'd made hadn't severed a major pulse path.

He'd made the cut as small as possible, and worked mostly by feel, his fingers deep within the man's body. It had been incredible to watch.

Coming to the door of their house, Tessia stepped forward to open it. But as she reached out for the handle, the door swung inward. Her mother drew them inside, her face lined with worry.

"Cannia said you were treating a Sachakan. I thought at first she meant *him*. I thought, "How could a magician be that badly injured?" but she told me it was the slave. Is he alive?"

"Yes," Tessia's father said.

"Will he stay so?"

"It's unlikely. He's a tough one, though."

"Didn't hardly yell at all," Tessia agreed. "Though I suspect that's because he was afraid of attracting his master's attention."

Her mother turned to regard her. She opened her mouth, then closed it again and shook her head.

"Did they feed you?" she asked.

Her father looked thoughtful.

"Keron brought some food," Tessia answered for him, "but we didn't have time to eat it."

"I'll heat up some soup." The woman ushered them into the kitchen. Tessia and her father dropped into two chairs by the cooking table. Stirring up the coals in the fire, her mother persuaded some fresh wood to catch then hitched a small pan over the flames.

"We'll have to check on him regularly," Tessia's father murmured, more to himself than to Tessia or her mother. "Change his bandages. Watch for signs of fever."

"Did Cannia say why he was beaten?" Tessia asked her mother.

The woman shook her head. "What reason do those Sachakan brutes need? Most likely he did it for fun, but put a bit more force into it than he intended."

"Lord Yerven always said that not all Sachakans are cruel," her father said.

"Just most of them," Tessia finished. She smiled. Lord Dakon's father had died when she was a child. Her memories of him were of a kindly, vague old man who always carried sweetdrops to give to the village children.

"Well, this is clearly one of the cruel ones." Tessia's mother looked at her husband and her frown returned. "I wish you didn't have to go back there."

He smiled grimly. "Lord Dakon will not allow anything to happen to us."

The woman looked from him to Tessia and back. Her frown deepened and her expression changed from concern to annoyance. Turning back to the fire, she tested the soup with the tip of a finger, and nodded to herself. She brought out the pan and poured its contents into two mugs. Tessia took both and handed one to her father. The broth was warm and delicious, and she felt herself growing rapidly sleepier as she drank it. Her father's eyelids drooped.

"Off to bed now, the both of you," her mother said as soon as they had finished. Neither of them argued as she ordered them upstairs to their rooms. Intense weariness washed over Tessia as she changed into nightclothes. Climbing under the covers, she sighed contentedly.

Just as she began to drift into sleep the sound of voices roused her again.

The sound was coming from across the corridor. From her parents' bedroom. Remembering her conversation with her father the previous day, she felt a twinge of anxiety. She pushed herself into a sitting position, then swung her feet down to the floor.

Her door made only a thin, quiet squeak as she opened it. The last time she had listened in on a late night conversation between her parents had been many years before, when she was only a child. Padding slowly and silently to their door, she pressed her ear to the wood.

"You want them too," her mother said.

"Of course. But I would never expect that of Tessia if she didn't want them," her father replied.

"You'd be disappointed, though."

"And relieved. It is always a risk. I've seen too many healthy women die."

"It is a risk we must all take. To not have children out of fear is wrong. Yes, it is a risk, but the rewards are so great. She could deny herself great joy. And who will look after her when she is old?"

Silence followed.

"If she had a son, you could train the boy," her mother added.

"It is too late for that. When I have grown too old to work the boy would still be too young and inexperienced to take on the responsibility."

"So you train Tessia instead? She *can't* replace you. You *know* that."

"She might, if she shared the task with another healer. She could be . . . I don't know what to call it . . . something between a healer and a birthmother. A . . . a 'carer', perhaps. Or at least an assistant."

Tessia wanted to interrupt, to tell them that she could be more than half a healer, but she kept silent and still. Bursting into the room, after having obviously eavesdropped, would hardly do anything to change her mother's mind.

"You have to take on a village boy," her mother said firmly. "And you must stop training her. It has filled her head with impossible ideas. She will not even consider marriage or raising a family until she stops trying to be a healer."

"If I am to employ a new apprentice he will take time to train. I will need Tessia's assistance in the meantime. The village is growing larger, and will keep growing. By the time I have trained this boy we may need two healers here. Tessia could continue her work – perhaps marry as well."

"Her husband would not allow it."

"He might, if she chose the right man. An intelligent man . . ."

"A *tolerant* man. A man who does not mind gossip and breaking tradition. Where is she going to find such a one?"

Tessia's father was silent a long time.

"I'm tired. I need to sleep," he said eventually.

"We both do. I was up most of the night worrying about you two. Especially with Tessia being in the same house as that Sachakan brute."

"We were in no danger. Lord Dakon is a good man."

The few words that followed were muffled. Tessia waited until the pair had not spoken for some time, then carefully crept back to her bed.

Last night I proved my worth to him, she thought smugly. *He can't ask me to stop assisting him now. He knows no foolish village boy would have had the nerve or knowledge to deal with that slave's injuries.*

But I did.