

TIJED UDZETIL

Parnadhj was led astray by beauty.

Or rather, that was how his mother once put it.

She was an impish woman, his mother. Too much so for her own good, on occasion. She did things—things of which the local *Edzi* did not approve. It must have been a certain mischief in her that allowed her young son to travel so young—and with an outsider, of all things—to Prau in the first place, where he'd first seen one of that city's fabled libraries.

He'd been bewitched then, too. Parnadhj had told, wisely, no one at the time, but the sight of all that forbidden fruit—*books*—tens of thousands of them—all lined up on shelves—every one of them off limits, and thus, to a young man dreaming of larger vistas—extraordinarily exciting—it had haunted him for years afterward.

But the books had only tempted him. It was beauty that finally did him in.

He'd gone with Uhludzek and the rest of them to the bridge—as they often did—to play in the street, or, better, to taunt the children of the *kelagishaga*. Or best of all, to dash a little across, pelt one of them with rocks before the bridge guards could move in to break it up.

He'd gone, and they'd been standing there, trying to work up the nerve to sneak across—Uhludzek needling some of the younger boys, trying to shame them into doing it.

And then they'd seen her, in the street across the river, passing the entrance to the bridge.

She was dark, pretty, small—ebony skin, black hair—working her way along the street through the crowds at the market stalls.

There was no mistaking what she was. The river was narrow, and Parnadhj could see her black scholars' satchel slung over her shoulder, the dark metal of her *tijed udzetil* glinting dully in the sunlight from where it nestled between her breasts. She wore it on a leather thong around her neck.

He would later wear his own that way for decades—had worn it that way from the day he'd been accepted as a student. To brush his fingers idly against it, feel the thin, crude lettering along its edge, was to touch history, a story of books again, a library burned 1500 years before, and those who died within it, trying to extinguish the flames. You were supposed to wear it to remind you of that, and of a few things besides.

You were supposed to wear it to remind you of priorities, and for Parnadhj, it worked. Because now and then, glancing at it, resting against his chest, he'd think of her.

There was no mistaking it, seeing it, that day, across the river: she was a *gereit'suh*—no mere lapsed apostate, nor merely an innocent not yet heard of The Way, but an actual devil in the flesh—a member of one of the few Iemren orders in Uslau. Uhludzek had seen it too, had started the chant—*Kelagish!* Whore!—and Parnadhj and the others had joined in.

And she'd heard them. For a second, she'd seemed to stoop, uncertainty, fear creeping into her pretty features.

And then she'd squared her shoulders, thrown them back, held up her head, turned to face them, coldly, silently, a few seconds.

And then, proudly, haughtily, had walked on, her back her only reproach to them.

Parnadhj had been stunned by her beauty, shamed into silence by her pride...

And he was pretty sure it was right there, right *then* that it had first begun—that creeping, insidious suspicion—a suspicion that coloured for years everything he heard, everything he was told by the *Edzi*—a suspicion that grew, in good time, into certainty...

It was right then that he'd begun to suspect he was on the wrong side of the river.

And so he'd been lead astray by beauty. Or, rather, as he'd once put it to one of the few students he'd ever told that story, he could claim to be one of presumably very many in the world actually brought *to* their senses by beauty.