

TAMORA PIERCE

The Circle Opens

#4

Shatterglass

 SCHOLASTIC

SHATTERGLASS

BOOK FOUR OF
THE CIRCLE OPENS
QUARTET

TAMORA PIERCE

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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TO MY FATHER, WAYNE FRANKLIN PIERCE

YOU TAUGHT ME TO SOAR WITH MY STORIES.
NOW, AT LAST, THE OLD EAGLE FLIES FREE.
MAY YOU FIND GOOD WINDS, CLEAN AIR,
AND THE UNIVERSE UNDER YOUR WINGS.

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THARIO



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miles $\frac{1}{8}$

Piraki Gate
Prachoun slum

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- kilometers $\frac{1}{4}$
miles $\frac{1}{8}$

KHAPIK



Tharios, capital of the city-state of Tharios

On the Ithocot Sea

The short, plump redhead walked out of the house that belonged to her hostess and looked around, her air that of someone about to embark on a grand adventure. She shook out her pale blue cotton dress and petticoats, then wrapped a collection of breezes around her chubby person as someone else might drape the folds of a shawl before she went to market. The breezes came obediently to her call, having become so much a part of her in the girl's travels that they no longer rebelled. They spun around her black cotton stockings and sensible leather shoes, raced along the folds of her skirt and petticoats, slid along the girl's arms and over her sunburned, long-nosed face. They swept over the spectacles that shielded intense gray eyes framed by long, gold lashes, and twined themselves over and along her head. They followed the paths of her double handful of copper braids, all pinned neatly to her scalp in a series of rings that left no end visible. Only two long, thin braids were allowed to hang free. They framed either side of her stubborn face.

With her breezes placed to her satisfaction, guardians against the intense southern heat, the girl whistled. The big, shaggy white dog that was busily marking the corners of the house whuffed at her.

"Come on, Little Bear," ordered Trisana Chandler, known to her friends as Tris. "It's not really your house anyway."

The dog fell in step beside the girl, tongue lolling in cheerful good humor. His white curls, recently washed, bounced with his trot; his long, plumed tail was a proud banner. He was a big animal, his head on a level with Tris's breastbone. Despite his size, he wore the air of an easy-to-please puppy as effortlessly as the girl wore her breezes.

Tris strode down the flagstone path and out through the university gates without so much as a backward glance at the glory of white stucco and marble that crowned the hill above the house. She thought that the university, called Heskalfos, was fine in its own right, and its high point — the soaring tower known as Phakomathen — was pretty, but there were perfectly good universities in the north. She was on her way to see the true glory of Tharios, its glassmakers. Let her teacher, Niko, join the hostess, Jumshida, and many other learned mages and apprentices in their long-winded, long-lasting presentations on the nature of any and all vision magics. Tris, on the other hand, was interested in the kind of visual magic wrought by someone who held a blowpipe that bore molten glass on its end.

At one of the many side entrances to the grounds of Heskalfos, Tris halted and

scowled. Had Jumshida said to turn left or go straight once she was outside the university enclosure?

A girl her own age stood nearby at a loading dock, emptying the contents of a trash barrel into the back of a cart. The muscles of her arms stood out like steel cables. Though she was clearly female, she wore her hair cut off at one length at ear level, and the knee-length tunic worn by Tharian men. She was also extremely dirty.

“Excuse me,” Tris called to her. “Do you know the way to Achaya Square?”

The girl picked up the second barrel in a row of them and dumped its contents into her cart.

Tris cleared her throat and raised her voice. “I *said*, can you tell me the way to Achaya Square?”

The girl flicked her eyes toward Tris, then away. She dumped her empty barrel next to the others, and picked up a full one.

Well, thought Tris. She can hear me; she’s just being rude. She stalked over to the cart. “Don’t you people believe in courtesy to visitors?” she demanded crossly. “Can all you Tharians so convinced that the world began here that you can’t be bothered to be polite?”

Though the barrel she had taken to the cart was still half full, the girl set it down and fixed her gaze on Tris’s toes. “You *shenosi*,” she said quietly, using the Tharian word for foreigners. “Don’t they have guidebooks where you come from?”

Tris’s scowl deepened. She was not particularly a patient girl. “I asked a simple question. And you can look at me if you’re going to be snippy.”

“Oh, it’s a simple enough question,” replied the girl, still soft-voiced, her eyes fixed on Tris’s no-nonsense shoes. “As simple as the way is if you just follow the long beak of yours. And I’ll give you some information for nothing, since you’re obviously too ignorant to live. You don’t talk to *prathmuni*, and *prathmuni* don’t talk to you. *Prathmuni* don’t exist.”

“What are *prathmuni*?” demanded Tris. She chose not to take offense at the remark about her nose. It was not her best feature and never had been.

“I am a *prathmun*,” retorted the girl. “My mother, my sisters, and my brothers are *prathmuni*. We’re untouchable, degraded, *invisible*. Am I getting through that thick northern skull yet?”

“Why?” asked Tris, curious now. This was far more interesting than a simple answer to her question. “Why should a *prathmun* be those things?”

The girl sighed, and rubbed her face with her hands, smearing more dirt into her hair. “We handle the bodies of the dead,” she told Tris wearily. “We skin and tan animal hides. We make shoes. We take out the night soil. But mostly, we handle the dead, which means we defile whatever we touch. If you don’t move along and a *giladh* —”

“What?” asked Tris.

“One of the *visible* people,” replied the girl. “If they see you talking to me, they’ll demand you get yourself ritually cleansed before you go anywhere or do anything. Now will you go away?” demanded the *prathmun*, impatient. “You’ll get cleansed *shenos*, but I’ll be whipped.”

She said it so flatly that Tris believed her. She walked two steps away, then asked without turning around, “What’s *shenos*? And how do you tell who’s a *prathmun*?”

“A foreigner is *shenos*,” retorted the *prathmun*, dumping the rest of her trash barrel into the cart. “And we all have the same haircut and the same kind of clothes and straw sandals. Now *go*.”

Tris followed the road that lay straight before her, the direction the *prathmun* had indicated with such flattery. “Niko said I’d find some of the customs here barbaric,” she informed Little Bear when she was out of earshot of the *prathmun*. “I’ll bet you’ll get a chop for supper this is one of the ones he meant. Whoever heard of people not being people just because they deal with the dead?”

Once she reached Achaya Square, Tris found the Street of Glass easily enough. Reading about Tharios on the way here, she had formulated a plan of exploration with her usual care to detail. She would start at the foot of the street where most of the city’s glassmakers kept their shops, beginning with the smaller, humbler establishments near the Piraki Gate, and work her way back to Achaya Square until her feet hurt. She meant to spend a number of days at the shops that caught her interest, but first she wanted an overview. Tris was the kind of girl who appreciated a solid plan of action, perhaps because often her life, and her magic, was in too much of an uproar to be organized.

As she walked, she looked on the sights and people of Tharios with interest. Buildings here were of two kinds, stucco roofed with tile — like those in her home on the Pebbled Sea — or public buildings built of white marble, fronted with graceful colors and flat-roofed, with corners and column heads cut into graceful lines. The Street of Glass and Achaya Square fountains were marble or a pretty pink granite. Statues carved from marble and painted to look lifelike stood on either side of the paved stones of the road. It was all very lavish and expensive. Tris might not have approved, but her view of people who spent so much on decoration was leavened when closer inspection showed her soft edges on statues and public buildings, and fountain carvings worn almost unrecognizable by long years of weather. Tharios was an old city, and its treasures were built to last.

The Tharians themselves were a feast for her eyes. The natives ranged in skin color from pale brown to black, and while their hair was usually black or brown, many women used henna to redden it. Men cropped their hair very short or even shaved their heads altogether. Ladies bundled their hair into masses of curls that tilted their heads to the appropriate, sophisticated, Tharian angle. The *prathmun*, male and female, sported the same rough, one-length cut Tris had seen on the girl

she spoke to. All *prathmuni* wore a ragged, dirty version of the knee-length tunic worn by Tharian men. Tharian women dressed in an ankle-length, drape-sleeved version called a *kyten*. In summer these garments were cotton, linen, or silk, with sashes or ribbon belts twined around waists and hips. On top of the tunic or *kyten*, upper-class Tharians also wore colored stoles, each of which indicated the wearer's profession. She knew that mages here wore blue stoles, shopkeepers green, and priests of the All-Seeing God red. Beyond that she was lost. No matter what color the stole, it was usually made of the lightest cotton, or even silk, money could buy. The Tharians looked cool and comfortable to Tris.

Since the *prathmun* girl had called her attention to shoes, Tris noted that better-dressed Tharian men and women generally wore leather sandals that laced up to the knee. Many of the poorer residents went barefoot. This wasn't as risky as it might be anywhere else: Tris saw *prathmuni* collecting trash and cleaning the streets on nearly every block.

Though Little Bear was content to stay with his mistress, Tris's breezes were not. They roamed freely around her, tugging at curls, tunics, *kytens*, and stoles, exploring people's faces, then returning to Tris like excited children gone for a walk with their favorite aunt. They brought scraps of conversations about trade rates, fashion, family quarrels, and political discussions from all around her, pouring those scraps into her ears. She half-listened, always interested in local gossip.

Some conversations mentioned her. A few of the Tharians she passed had discovered her way to stay cool. Perhaps her breezes wouldn't have been noticed if the air were not perfectly still. The only winds outside Tris's circle of influence were those made by handheld fans and those roused by pigeons in flight from uncarpeted feet.

Tris sighed, and drew the breezes closer to her. People continued to stare as her dress and petticoats stirred in different directions. She ignored them. It was too hot to give up her fresh air so a number of stuck-up southerners weren't made nervous. If they were as clever as they claimed, they'd find ways to hold breezes of their own. Tris told herself.

She had a number of breezes tied up in knots of thread back at the house. Perhaps she could peddle some at the market, and make a bit of extra money. There were two more moons of summer to go, and the problem with city walls was that they tended to keep out the wind. She ought to be able to sell a knot, or two, or three, for pocket money. She would ask Jumshida how to go about it.

On she walked, planning and observing. She passed between shops filled with wonders: vases, bowls, platters, glass animals in a multitude of colors and sizes. In the shops on the Achaya Square end of the Street of Glass, windows were made of small panes of glass, treasure troves in and of themselves that gave a watery, rippling shape to the beautiful objects behind them.

Mingled with the higher-priced glass was glass that had been spelled in some way. Magical charms and letters in the sides and rims of pieces, suncatchers magicked to catch more than just sun, rounds of glass imbued with magic to capture and hold an image in them, all glinted silver in Tris's vision, showing her the work of the glass mages of Tharios. It was for this reason that she chose to start among the poorer shops, those more likely to sell plain glass and few charms. Tris knew she would spend most of her time later among the glass mages, comparing notes and learning how they practiced their craft.

Closer to Labrykas Square the shops had ordinary, shuttered windows, with their wares arranged on shelves to tempt passersby. Tris lingered at one and another, admiring the curve of a bowl or the blue-green hue of a cosmetics bottle, but she always made herself walk on after a moment. She was determined to start at the very bottom of the glassmakers' pecking order.

As Tris approached Labrykas Square, the first public square beyond the Pirah Gate, her breezes carried a conversation to her. "— a disgrace!" someone cried. "One of the riffraff, murdered and left in the Labrykas Square fountain like, like so much trash!"

"It will take a powerful cleansing to purify the fountain again," a woman replied soberly. "Surely the All-Seeing God will take offense against the district for this defilement —"

"The district? I think not!" retorted the first speaker. "It's obviously the work of some *shenos* who respects nothing and no one. The All-Seeing knows that no Tharian would commit so foul an act."

"The Keepers of the Public Good will put a stop to it," the woman said with the firmness of complete belief. "They have—"

The breeze had not caught the rest of the discussion. Tris shook her head as she walked on. Someone is murdered, and all these people care about is the purity of the square? she thought, baffled. *That's* pretty heartless.

She also wasn't inclined to believe these Keepers would be able to do much about the killing. How effective could they be? They were each elected to serve a three-year term by the Assembly, a body of the oldest families and the wealthiest landholders. They would not have the experience or cunning of a proper ruler who'd been raised for the position, like Duke Vedris of Emelan, Capchen's king and queen, or Empress Berenene of Namorn. She was amazed that the Tharians got anything done, if their entire political system was run by a mob. She had seen at home how much a governing council could quibble, fuss, debate, argue, and fight, with nothing to show for it — and Winding Circle's governing council was only twenty people. She'd heard there were more than three hundred in the Assembly.

"It's different when one man or woman is responsible for a country," she told Little Bear as they passed through Labrykas Square. The fountain, which she had

seen on her arrival in the city, was shrouded in a kind of white, roofless tent. “They have to jump on this kind of nonsense right away, or everyone knows they’re to blame. Here, all the rulers have to do is point to the other Keeper, or someone from the Assembly, and say *they’re* supposed to be in charge of that.” Disgusted, Tris shook her head and thrust all such dissatisfactions from her mind. She was here to learn, not to let the strange ways in which other people governed themselves get on her nerves.

At last she reached the part of the Street of Glass that she meant to explore first—the part that stretched between Labrykas Square and the pleasure district known as Khapik. She took a moment to look around using her magical vision. One thing she would say in favor of the Tharians, they looked after the magic that was used in public places. She saw very few tag-ends of old charms and spells gleaming silver on walls or around windows and doors. Spells there were in plenty, the usual creations for protection, health, and prosperity that anyone who could afford it paid to have laid on their homes and businesses. The thing that Tris admired was that local magicians either got rid of what remained of older spells, or wrote the same kind of spells afresh, so that the magic in them shone in bright silver layers, an indication that differences in the spells did not conflict and cause the magic to go astray.

Tris walked idly up the street, admiring the lacelike patterns of spells on the shop walls, tracing a curve here, a letter there, with her finger. She knew most by heart, but this Tharian way of copying them over and over seemed to extend their power, even if the mage who added the most recent layer wasn’t particularly strong.

Suddenly she felt a twist in the air. Most of her breezes, all of the ones she had acquired in recent months, fled. Only those she had brought from Winding Circle stayed, though she felt them struggle against some powerful call. The escaping breezes whipped around the corner of a nearby workshop: TOUCHSTONE GLASS, according to the sign.

The breezes weren’t the only things on the move. Power from every charm and spell within fifty feet of the shop streamed past Tris to round the corner in silver ribbons: protection magic, fire-damping magic, health magic, wards for luck and prosperity, it didn’t seem to matter. Something flexed in the air a second time. Without stopping to ask if she did the wisest thing, she pelted around the corner into the rear yard of Touchstone Glass.

She plunged into a stream of magic. All of it poured through the open doors of the workshop set apart from the main building. It swirled around a man who toiled in front of a furnace. He stood sidelong to the door, a glassmaker’s blowpipe to his lips as he tried to give form to an orange blob of molten glass. Twirling the pipe with one hand, he shaped the base of his creation with a mold clasped in the other.

For a moment Tris thought all was well. Then she realized that despite the glassblower’s twirling of the pipe and the steady stream of air he forced into it, the

orange blob wriggled, bulged, and then sank like a burlap sack with a cat inside. She had never seen glass do that before. Magic flooded into the man, sliding under his leather apron, squirming into short blonde hair cropped close to his blocky head, tugging at his sleeves, then merging where his lips met the pipe. Down its length the magic streamed, disappearing into the molten glass.

The man thrust the glass back into the open furnace, waited a moment, then brought the pipe to his lips. He cupped the base of the glass with his mold and blew into the pipe. The material at its end bulged, twisted, and thrust about even harder, plainly fighting him. It grew longer and snakelike, with big lumps on top and smaller ones underneath. Magic gleamed, as if the glass were shot through with silver threads as they stretched away from the pipe. As it pulled free, its connection to the blowpipe stretched thinner and thinner. Only a thread connected it to the rod.

Tris shook her head. The man had obviously lost control of his magical workings. “You’d better let it go,” she informed him. “And what possessed you, that you didn’t draw a protective circle?”

The man jerked and yanked the pipe from his lips. The glass wriggled, spiraled, and broke free, tumbling in the air as it flew madly around the room. Little Bebe yelped and fled into the yard.

“Why didn’t you undo it?” Tris demanded. She ducked as writhing glass zoomed over her head. “Didn’t they teach you, the more power you throw into magic going awry, the more it will fight your control? Forget reusing the glass. It’s so full of magic now you’ll have *real* trouble if you try to make it into anything else.”

The glass thing — she couldn’t tell what it was — landed on the man’s skull. Smoke and the stench of burning hair rolled away from its feet. The man swore and slapped at it. Terrified, his creation fled. As it flew, its features became sharper, more identifiable. The big lumps became very large, batlike wings. Smaller lumps stretched out to become powerful hind legs and short forelegs. Lesser points shaped themselves as ears, an upright ribbed fin rose on its neck; another point fixed the end of the glass as a tail. When the thing lit on a worktable, Tris saw the form it had fought to gain. It was a glass dragon, silver-veined with magic, clear through and through. It was twelve inches long from nose to rump, with six more inches of tail.

The man had dumped a pail of water on his head as soon as the dragon left him. Now he flung his blowpipe across the room, shattering three vases.

“Tantrums don’t do the least bit of good,” Tris then informed him, hands on hips. “Old as you are, surely you know that much.” She noted distantly that there was a circle of dead white hair atop the man’s head, almost invisible against the bright, closely cropped blonde hair that surrounded it.

He wheezed, coughed, gasped, and glared at her with very blue eyes. “Who is Eilig’s name are you? And what did you do to me?” He spoke slowly and carefully, which didn’t match his scarlet face and trembling hands.

Tris scowled. “You did it to yourself, dolt. You threw good magic after bad *including* power you drained from all around this neighborhood because you didn’t protect the workshop. Now look. You’ll have to feed it and care for it, you know. And what it eats is beyond me. Living metal feeds on metal ores in the ground, but living glass?” She tugged one of the thin braids that framed her face, picking the problem apart. “Sand, I’d suspect. And natron, and seashells, since that’s what you make glass with in the first place. And antimony and magnesium to make it clear.”

“Will you be *quiet*?” the man cried, his voice still low. “I have — no magic! Just — a seed, barely enough to, to make the glass easier.”

Tris glared at him. “I may only be fourteen, but I’m not stupid, and you’re a terrible liar.”

The glassblower doubled his big hands into fists. “I — am — not — a — liar!” he cried, his slow words a sharp contrast to his enraged face. “How dare you address me like that? Get out!”

Little Bear didn’t like the thing that zipped so dangerously around the workshop, but even less did he like the glassblower. He thrust himself between Tris and the man, hackles up, lips peeled away from his teeth, a low growl rumbling through his large chest.

“Now look,” Tris said with a sigh. “You upset my dog.”

The glassblower backed away. “I am a journeyman of the Glassmakers’ Guild,” he said, forcing the words past clumsy lips. “I have no magic. I am no liar. I want you and your dog gone. And that *thing* you made, too!”

“*I* made?” Tris demanded, aghast. “As if I didn’t see the power flow from you into the glass! Look, Master Jumped-Up Journeyman, that dragon is *your* creation —”

The glassblower yelled and grabbed a long pair of metal tongs. The dragon had landed on a worktable and was trying to climb into a jar on top of it. “Get out of there!” he cried, smacking the tongs on the table a half-inch from the dragon’s tail. “Coloring — agents cost — money!” His sluggish speech was in sharp contrast to his quick strike at the dragon.

The glass creature leaped clear before the glassblower could shatter it with a second blow. It flew to a shelf on the wall, its front half covered with powder. Clinging to the shelf, it spat blue fire at its attacker. Once clear of its muzzle, the flames solidified and fell to shatter on the floor.

“Don’t you dare hit that creature!” cried Tris. “It’s alive — you might break it!”

“I’ll smash it to bits,” the man growled. He poked the dragon with his tongs as it scrambled a new jar with its claws. For a moment it teetered, then righted itself. The man advanced on it, tongs raised in his hand.

“It’s a *living thing*,” Tris called. “You may have made it, but that doesn’t give you the right to break it.” She yanked one of her thin braids free of its tie and combed it out with her fingers. Sparks formed in the crimped red locks, sticking to her palms.

The glassblower ignored her. The dragon glided to another shelf, one that supported an uncorked jar. Curious, it stuck its head inside. "That's it," the man said grimly. "You're dead." With tongs raised high, he went after it like a man in urgent pursuit of a mouse.

"I'm warning you," Tris said clearly. She had to tell people when she was about to use particular magics: in her hands, magic was a deadly weapon and had to be treated as such. "You can't kill that."

"Watch me." The man struck at the dragon, missing by half an inch. When he raised his weapon again, a hair-thin lightning bolt slammed into the tongs. The man shrieked and dropped them, nursing a hand and arm that twitched in the aftermath of a moderate shock. He whirled to stare at Tris, white showing all the way around his irises.

She waited, her loosened braid hanging beside her face, sparks glinting along its strands. In her open right hand a circle of lightning played, leaping from finger to finger. "Try to break that poor creature again and what you just got will seem like a love tap," she said, crimson with fury. "You can't kill it — didn't your teacher make you learn *anything*? Once you make a working that lives, you have to treat it like you would a human child. You're not allowed to destroy a living creation."

The dragon knew a champion when it saw one. Voicing a cry like the sound of a knife striking glass, it flew to Tris and perched on her shoulder, wrapping itself around her neck.

"Yes, that's fine," she reassured it, stroking the creature where it crossed her neck. "Calm down." She kept her eyes on the glassblower, who now huddled in the corner farthest from her, clutching the hand she'd shocked. His face was ash gray; his hair stood on end. "Who's your teacher?" Tris demanded.

"I don't have one," he replied, his speech agonizingly slow.

"Nonsense. You may as well tell me. I'll find out," she said. "I'll have your master's name before the week's done."

The man shook his head.

"And if your teacher said you were fit to practice magic and turned you loose on the world, I'm reporting you both to the Mages' Guild," Tris snapped. Was there something wrong with him? she wondered, puzzled. Was he slow of mind? He spoke as if he were, though his eyes were too intelligent, compared with the simpletons she had known. He had to be twenty if he were a day, yet he was huddled down like a child who expected a beating. She hadn't given him enough of a shock to hurt him permanently. Something here wasn't right, but clearly she would get nothing else from the fellow. "What about the dragon?" she wanted to know. "Do you claim it as yours? Will you be responsible for it?"

The glassblower shook his head vehemently.

Tris scowled at him. "Well, that's of a piece with everything else I've noticed

about you,” she said tartly. “If *you* won’t take responsibility for it, then I — Trisander Chandler, educated at Winding Circle Temple, take charge of this magical creation. Be sure I’ll mention *that* at the Mages’ Guild, too!”

Outside Tris fed the lightning in her hand into her pinned-down braids. With fingers that still trembled with anger she tucked the braid she’d pulled apart behind one ear. She would visit more shops and calm down. She wanted to talk to Nik about the dragon before she tracked down the local Mages’ Guild, and he wouldn’t be back until his conference ended late that afternoon. She might as well use her time profitably.

“Come on, Bear,” she ordered the dog. “Let’s find someplace sane.”

Kethlun Warder, journeyman glassblower, didn’t know how much time passed before he found the courage to get to his feet. The hand and arm that held the tong had gone from painful jerking to a pins-and-needles sensation. When he touched his good hand to his head, he found that his hair was nearly flat again, though it crackled still.

Slowly he closed the hand that had taken the lightning’s power. It was stiff, but worked. He moved each finger, then his wrist, forearm, and at last the entire arm. Everything worked. The motion was slow, but at least he wasn’t paralyzed a second time.

What about the rest? he thought as he tried to stand. Last year it had taken weeks, even months, to get all of his body working again.

On his feet he wavered, then dropped to his knees. Fear swamped him: had shock paralyzed him? After a moment’s thought he tried again. Carefully he stretched first one leg, then the other, leaning on his hands. Only when his knees responded as they should did he try to stand a second time.

His mind was functioning, he thought as he leaned on a worktable. But what of his mouth? He was scared to try, in case he learned that she had turned him back into a gobbling freak, but he was also scared not to try. His ability to speak had taken the longest to return, and he was still unable to talk quickly.

He drew himself upright, took a long breath, and blew out, thrusting all emotion away. He emptied his lungs completely before he filled them again. Once he was calmer, he said, “My n-name is Keth-lun W-warder. I am-m a journeyman. Heartened, he went on, “I come from — Dancruan in N-namorn. My family is in the glass tr-ade.”

Relief doused over him like cold water. Yes, the stammer was back, but it wasn’t as bad as it had been. He could manage it by speaking slowly. His hands were steady enough. He was all right, or as much so as he’d been in the past year.

He’d heard his mother say that he was damaged, not incapable. As usual, she had hit the nail on the head. He was damaged, but he was getting better. He would *live*

better. He just needed time.

A year ago he had not needed time. Glassblowing had been natural to him. He had expected to succeed every time he thrust a blowpipe into the furnace. He'd pitied apprentices who inhaled by accident, burning their tongues or throat with drops of molten liquid. He'd smirked as they singed their eyebrows, burned their arms, or dropped half of the gather into the flames. The basic work had come easily, greased by his tiny drop of magic, but the artistry had been all his own. Whenever the subject of his lack of greater magic came up, he reminded his family that at least he had considerable talent.

Then he'd gone for a walk along the Syth one summer afternoon. The storm caught him in the dunes between the beach and the Imperial Highway, tearing at his clothes and hair, driving sand into his face. In a panic, he ran for shelter instead of dropping into a dip between the dunes and lying flat on the ground. The lightning bolt caught him as he scrambled over the last dune between him and shelter. The only warning he'd had was the eerie sensation of all of his body hair standing straight up, before his old life ended in a flash of white heat.

That he'd survived was a miracle. The discovery that he was half-paralyzed and unable to speak made his survival a mockery.

But his youthful conceit had a tough core to it. He fought the living tomb of his body. He forced a finger to move, then a toe, then two fingers, two toes. Hour after hour, day after day, he reclaimed his own flesh. When his family saw that his mind still functioned, they brought in the best healer-mages in Dancruan. The happiest hour of his life was in the morning when he returned to his uncle's factory, ready to work once more.

By noon that day his happiness was dust. His old ease was gone. Even as a first-year apprentice his hands were never clumsy with the tools, sands, salts, ashes, and woods that were the basis of glasswork. The first time he tried to blow glass, his breath had hitched, he'd jerked the rod up, and a fleck of red-hot glass rolled onto his tongue. When he tried to pour glass into a mold, it shifted, making one side of the bowl far thinner than the other. For weeks every piece he made ended in the culler or waste-glass barrel, to be remelted or used in other projects.

The other apprentices and journeymen smirked as his gathers dropped in the furnace or onto the floor. They grinned as the masters rejected piece after piece. Once Kethlun had never measured how much of a coloring agent to add to a crucible of molten glass: he just knew. When he measured now, the colors came out wrong.

He did not dare say that he thought the glass itself had turned on him. He had the notion that it was trying to tell him things. It wanted him to shape it in ways that differed from what *he* wanted. Keth feared that if he spoke such thoughts to any of his family, they would turn him over to the healers who specialize in madness, and never let him near a furnace again. Even the mages in his family never talked of gla

as if it were alive.

One spring day he came home to find the guildmasters seated with his father and uncles. All of them, men and women, looked decidedly uncomfortable when they saw him. Keth's brain, so much quicker than his tongue or hands, told him what was in the wind. The guildmasters meant to strip him of his journeyman's rank, and send him back among the apprentices until he regained his old skill, if he ever did.

He could not bear it. "I've been th-thinking," he said, trying to keep from stammering. He leaned against the receiving-room wall, hoping to look casual, hoping they would not sense his fear. "A change of scene, th-that's what I need. Fresh in-spiration. I'm a j-journeyman. I'll journey. South, I th-think. Visit the cousins. Learn new techniques."

Guildmistress Hafgwyn looked at Kethlun's father. "It might be for the best," she said. "I am not comfortable with the matter we discussed." Her bright black eyes met Keth's. "It will do. You may go with the guild's protection. Bring fresh knowledge back to us, along with your old skill."

And so he had worked his way down the coast of the Endless Ocean, going around the Pebbled Sea and continuing south and east. At last he reached the shop of his fourth cousin once removed, Antonou Tinas, in Tharios. By then he'd recovered some of his ability with molds and pulled glass. Antonou was getting old. He preferred to do engraving and polishing in the main shop as he waited on customers. Keth could make the pieces Antonou needed, then practice his glassblowing in private, with no one to see how badly he did it.

Just when he felt safe, along came this girl, and her lightning.

Trembling, Keth forced himself outside, to the well, and drank some water. Then he returned to the workshop. It was a shambles. He'd broken finished glass, thrown his blowpipe, knocked over jars of coloring agents. He had to clean up before Antonou saw the mess. He reached for a broom.

The plump redhead had held lightning in her hand as casually as if it were a bracelet she had just taken off. It glinted in that free lock of hair by her face like the bits of mica the *yaskedasi*, or entertainers, used to make their hair glitter in the torchlight. The girl had *thrown* lightning as a soldier would a spear, shocking his hand and arm into numbness. She'd done it to save the abomination that had wriggled out of his breath and into a gather of molten glass.

Keth never wanted to see that girl again. Please, he prayed to any gods that might be listening, I don't even want to see her *shadow* again.

Dema

Earlier that day

Dema Nomasdina was asleep. In his dreams he saw the four dead women whose killer he had yet to find: Nioki the tumbler, Farray the dancer, Ophelika the musician,

and Zudana the singer. All four women wore the yellow veil of the *yaskedasi* licensed entertainers who worked for the most part in the garden district called Khapik. Instead of floating around their heads, pinned over curls or braids, the veils were wrapped tightly around their necks and knotted. Each woman had the swollen, dark face of the strangled.

“He left me dumped in an alley like trash,” said Nioki. Despite the silk knotted around her throat, her voice was perfectly clear and damning in its grief.

“I was thrown down a cellar stair,” whispered Farray.

“He sat me against a building at the intersection of Lotus and Peacock streets for the world to see,” Ophelika reminded him.

“Me he laid in front of the Khapik Gate for some tradesman to find as he stumbled home,” Zudana said bitterly. “That tradesman fell over me like I was a sack of onions.”

“What are you doing?” asked Nioki. “Why does my ghost still drift in the green emptiness?”

“What are you doing?” moaned Ophelika through swollen lips. “My spirit is not cleansed.”

“What are you doing?” the dead women asked, their voices sharp in Dema’s ears. “Avenge us,” they said as they faded from view. The last thing Dema saw was their outstretched, straining hands, and the flutter of yellow silk.

“Nomasdina!” A rough hand shook his shoulder. “Wake up, *dhaskoi*. You’re not wanted.”

Dema sat up, his eyes barely open, the taste of last night’s greasy supper in his mouth. He’d gone to sleep at his worktable, on top of the pages of notes taken on the murders of the four *yaskedasi*. No wonder he dreamed of them. A glance at the window showed him rays of sunlight that leaked through cracks in the shutters. The room was hot and stuffy. “I’m off duty,” he mumbled.

“Good,” the sergeant on duty told him with false good cheer. “Then you’re free to ride to Labrykas Square. The district captain has sent for you.” The sergeant upended a ladle of water on Dema’s head. As Dema sputtered, the woman added with real kindness, “She knows you’ve been on duty all night. Don’t try to fix yourself up, just go.”

Dema went, though he couldn’t imagine what the Fifth District commander of the *arurim*, Tharios’s law enforcement agency and his employer, wanted with a veteran new mage like him. Dema had been an *arurim dhaskoi*, investigator mage, for only eight months. He’d done little to draw anyone’s attention. True, he was working on the murders of four Khapik *yaskedasi*, but he also knew that he’d been given the task of investigating the first murder and the three that followed it because no one cared if he caught the killer or not. One of the first words of *arurim* slang he’d learned was “*okozou*”, which meant “no real people involved.” It was a phrase used

to describe crimes among *yaskedasi*, *prathmuni*, or the poor of the slum called Hodenekes. It meant no one really meant Dema to *work* at finding the killer. He expected to be summoned before his watch station captain to explain why he'd made no progress weeks ago, until he realized the captain simply did not care.

A mounted *arurim* waited in front of the Elya Street station with a horse for Dema. Groggily he mounted up, thinking that it was a good thing he wore his tightly curled black hair cut very short. It was probably the only thing about him that was presentable. He scrubbed at his teeth with a finger, which he wiped on the edge of the saddle blanket. "You're sure you want *me*?" he asked the messenger.

The woman looked as if she'd spent all night on duty and should have been home to herself. She glared at him. "You're *arurim dhaskoi* Demakos Nomasdina, in charge of the investigation of four murdered *yaskedasi*, are you not? This is the Elya Street *arurimat*, and not my house, where I should be fixing breakfast for my children right now."

"Sorry," Dema replied, feeling guilty, even though he hadn't been the one to assign the *arurim* to find him.

The sergeant emerged from the station with a flask in each hand, one for the *arurim* and one for Dema. It held smoking hot jailers' tea, guaranteed to take the finish off wood and to wake the dead. "You're a lifesaver," the woman told the sergeant. "I may live to go home after all."

"They owe you the time you've spent after your shift getting our greenie, here," replied the sergeant with a nod to Dema. "Make sure they give it to you."

"I will," the *arurim* replied.

"And try not to dent the *dhaskoi*," added the sergeant. "He's a good enough son for all he belongs to the First Class."

Dema wasn't sure which would bother him more if he were awake, the slight to his class or the fact that even after eight months of service they still thought he couldn't take care of himself. It was too much to think about now. He thanked the sergeant for the tea instead and followed his *arurim* guide down the street.

Drinking hot tea at a trot was a thankless effort, but Dema made it anyway, catching the spilled drops on an end of the blue stole that marked him as a mage. As he drank and dodged people in the streets, he reflected on how badly he'd been cheated. He had chosen the *arurim* as his area of advancement because it seemed far less regulated than the army or navy, and infinitely less boring than the treasury or law courts. Few people would be able to order him about among the *arurim*, while every person with one more stripe, dot, or sword on his sleeve would make military life into something very much like work. Even when his *arurim* superiors gave him night duty, Dema was pleased. The Elya Street station was just four blocks from Khapik. If things were dull at work, a short walk led him to the best food, drink, and entertainment in Tharios, all neatly tucked inside the walls of the pleasure district.

The nettle in the garden of his service, the first dead *yaskedasu*, sprouted five months after he'd finished his training and settled in at Elya Street. He hadn't realized that the easy service of an *arurim dhaskoi* was due to the fact that, more than nine times out of ten, the victim knew the criminal. It was a family member, or a friend, or a neighborhood roughneck. These were all offenders that regular *arurim* found easily by talking to the family, friends, and neighbors of the victim, then tracking down all who looked suspicious, questioning them until they confessed. The *arurim dhaskoi* were called in only when the criminal was a mage, or when no one with a motive or chance to get at the victim could be traced. When the investigation of *yaskedasu* Nioki's murder produced no possible killers, the case had come to Dema.

Now, three dead women later, Dema felt like those animals must feel who chewed off a limb to escape a trap. His service to the *arurim* was no longer fun. He wanted to destroy the one who ruined the harmony of Khapik, and he couldn't even get his fellow *arurim* to care about it as much as he did. One *yaskedasu* or three *yaskedas* the others told him, *okozou* still meant no one was supposed to work up a sweat over this.

So Dema did his best, and knew it wasn't good enough. He was too ignorant. Most of his spells for uncovering events could be used only when he had a suspect or when the crime had taken place elsewhere or had not led to death. Trying to find the killer was like sifting through a ton of barley in search of a pin. No one knew anything. No one saw anything. The priests who had ritually and magically cleanse the murder sites saw nothing irregular, and Dema found no traces of magic. He was at his wits' end, even dreaming about the case. What was he doing wrong?

"I see word's got out," grumbled his *arurim* guide. Dema's head jerked up. He'd done it again, forgotten what he was supposed to be doing as he worried over the case. He'd been so preoccupied that he hadn't even noticed they had reached the square. Despite the very early hour — the sun was just up — the outer edges of the square were packed with human beings. Unlike most Tharian crowds, this one was hushed, silent, nervous gathering. The *arurim* had to poke and nudge people aside to clear the way for herself and Dema.

At last they emerged onto open ground, the Labrykas fountain. It stood in its full glory, each of its four lower basins six feet wide, fed from the mouths of three rearing horses. A long stone pillar topped by the double-headed axe called a *labry* spouted water to bedew the heads of the beautifully carved white marble horses. It was the first official Tharian monument seen by new arrivals who came through the Piraki Gate, and Dema never got tired of looking at it. Many mornings he would sit on the rim of a lower basin to listen to the water and relax after his night's service, calming down until he could ride home, serene.

When Dema saw the blot that fouled the south basin, he gasped. Inside a ring of

priests and *arurim* who stood around the fountain, a dead woman sprawled, her leg hanging out of the basin, her upper body in the water, her arms flung wide. Her makeup showed dead white against her swollen face. Her long black curls floated in the water, creating a chilly semblance of life. Her *kyten*, the longer, feminine version of the Tharian tunic, was streaked with filth. The long ends of her yellow veil had been carefully straightened to grip the basin's edge, like a yellow arrow that ended at her neck.

A short, stocky man in *arurim* red, wearing the silver-bordered white stole of the district commander, stalked up to Dema's horse. "Why haven't you caught the monster, *Dhaskoi Nomasdina*?" he growled. "Why didn't you stop him before he committed this, this atrocity!" He glared at the ring of priests and *arurim*. "A week before the priests of the All-Seeing tell us, a week before the fountain can be fully cleansed!" Already the priests were placing the anchor posts and white cloths that would shroud the entire fountain while they performed a major spiritual and magical cleansing. "A week before the people can begin to forget this offense against the order of the city!"

Dema tumbled from his horse's back and stood at attention as the commander raved. Finally, when the man fell silent, Dema said, "I've been doing my best, sir. This is a canny murderer, not the usual sort of criminal at all. He has found a way to hide his tracks from magical scrutiny, there are no witnesses when he kills them, and he transports them where he likes. I've only eight months in the *arurim*, and I do request extra people to patrol Khapik. He kills them there."

"You will do the proper work with those you have," snarled the commander. "With this abomination in a public place, the people will be more eager to come forward, to name this murderer and cleanse Tharios of him."

Dema's heart plummeted into his belly. According to the advice given him by the Elya Street *arurim* and the *arurim dhaski*, he *had been* doing all the proper things. "May I get a ban on the cleansing of this site, then?" he asked, his voice breaking. "Until I have a chance to go over it with spells of investigation?"

The commander leaned in close, his eyes fixed on Dema's. "Ban the cleansing?" he whispered in a voice more frightening than a yell. "Take one more moment that we must to erase this specter of disorder? It's not just the fountain that must be cleansed, you young idiot. It's the pipes and the source of the water itself. Apply yourself to proper investigation, and let us purify the square!"

Dema bowed his head. "I spoke rashly, without thought," he whispered. With the taint of death hanging over the square, the least he could expect was sin and riots in the Fifth District. The immediate cleansing of the city had stopped the violence and disease that followed the fall of the Kurchal Empire. Ridding Tharios of all taint of death in those days had purified her, had kept the city safe and standing while the rest of the world ran mad. Its purity had guarded the city from barbarian attacks and

made her leaders strong enough to do all that was necessary to restore order. Asking the priests to delay their cleansing was to open the door to madness. He hadn't stopped to think of that when he'd made his request.

The problem was, in crimes of this sort, cleansing nearly crippled investigators. It was both physical and magical, erasing all trace not just of the death, but of the killer and how the killer had come and gone from the death site.

"You had best *start* thinking, Demakos Nomasdina," the commander whispered, gripping Dema's arm in a hold that would leave bruises under Dema's brown skin. "Remember the pride of your clan. Now go look at that mess, then let the priests do their job."

Dema swallowed. He walked between two priests who were setting up the tentlike veil that would hide the long process of cleansing from the people's eyes, so they would not carry the taint of death away from the square. He approached the southern basin of the fountain, steeling himself to view another murdered woman. There were men and women at Elya Street, *arurim* and *dhaski*, who could look at someone who'd been robbed of life and eat a hearty meal after. Dema didn't know how they could do it. Even after eight months he still felt as if someone had offended him personally, had killed a member of Dema's own family — which was true enough. The other classes of Tharios were the responsibility of the First Class, Dema's class. Someone had taken the life of a young woman in *his* charge.

That she was young he guessed from her hands, unlined, with well-tended nails and the fresh, tight skin of her belly, feet, and legs. She wore the halter top and semisheer skirt, and tight, calf-length leggings of a tumbler or dancer; her brow, arms and legs were muscular. Dema glanced away from her eyes, so startled at the fate that had come upon her.

As he leaned over the edge of the basin, he noticed two priests closing in. "I'm not going to touch her," he snapped. "Stand away and leave me be."

They took a step back and waited, hands clasped at their waists, their eyes level as they watched Dema. The morning breeze tugged at their white head-veils and the ends of their complexly draped red stoles.

Dema glanced at the knot in the yellow veil — under the left ear, just like the knot on the other four victims. Bending, he squinted at the ends of the veil, laid so neatly on the basin's rim.

A gloved hand thrust its way into his vision, holding an ivory rod. "Use this," the priest of the All-Seeing told Dema, a kind note in his voice. "We will send you such tools, blessed for this work, *dhaskoi*."

"Do other *arurim dhaski* have them?" Dema wanted to know, meeting the priest's dark brown eyes.

"None of them want to get so close as you," replied the priest. "We have seen this in you before. Do not let curiosity take you too far. Yours is a noble house, free of

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