

*In rumour and strange sayings the truth
will hide.*

Snow will fall, the heart freeze over.

We will come when no one expects us.

Apocalypse of Tamar

Two men sat on a bench on the ice.

Between them a brazier glowed with hot coals,
its metal feet sinking into a pool of meltwater.

They sat silent, in the heart of the Frost Fair; in
its racket of bleating sheep, barking dogs, innumerable
traders calling their wares and, above all, the
ominous hammering. Meats sizzled on spits, babies
screamed, jugglers threw jingling bells, fiddlers
played for coins, and in cushioned booths sekoi of
all colours told spellbinding stories, their voices
unnaturally sharp and ringing in the bitter cold.

Finally the older man stirred. 'Are you sure?' he
muttered.

'I heard it in Tarkos. Then again last week in
Larminier Market. It's certain.' The cobbler, still
in his leather apron, stared bleakly out at the black
Watchtower in the centre of the frozen lake, as if
afraid its sentinels could hear him from there.

'He's been seen?'

'So they say.' The cobbler's dirty heel scratched
at a fish skeleton frozen in the ice; its wide eye
stared up at him. 'There's been a lot of talk. Prophecies
and odd rumours. What I heard was, that
on Flainsnight last year there was an enormous
explosion. The House of Trees split wide and out

of it, on black wings, a vision rose up into the sky, huge over Tasceron.' He glanced round, making the sign of honour furtively with his hand. 'It was him. The Crow.'

The old man spat. 'Incredible! What did it look like?'

'Huge. Black. A bird and not a bird. You know, like it said in the old Book.'

'I might. And it spoke?'

'So the woman who told me said.'

A scar-bull clattered by pulled by two men, its hooves slipping on the glassy lake. When they had gone the old man shrugged. 'Could be just rumour.'

The cobbler glanced round, worried. Behind them a pedlar was hawking ribbons and pins and fancy lace, a crowd was watching two men come to blows over the price of geese, and a boy was turning cart-wheels among the stalls, a few coppers in his cap on the ice. The cobbler drew up closer and dropped his voice. 'No. Why do you think the Watch have doubled their patrols? They've heard; they have spies everywhere.'

'So what did it say, this vision?'

'It said "*Listen Anara, your Makers are coming back to you; through the darkness and emptiness I call them. Flain and Tamar and Soren, even Kest will come. They will dispel the darkness. They will scatter the power of the Watch.*"'

The words, barely whispered, seemed dangerous, charged with power, as if they sparked in the freezing air. In the silence that followed, the racket of the fair seemed louder; both men were glad of it. The pedlar had spilled his tray and was kneeling on the ice, picking up pins awkwardly with numb fingers. The wind scuttered a few closer to the brazier, like silver slithers.

The old man held gloved hands to the heat. 'Well if it's true...'

'It is.'

'... Then it will change the world. I pray I live to see it.' He looked up ruefully over the tents and stalls to the Watchtower, glinting with frost. 'But unless the Makers come tomorrow it'll be too late for those poor souls.'

From here the hammering was louder. The half-constructed gallows were black, a rickety structure of high timbers built directly on to the ice, one man up there now on a ladder, hauling up the deadly swinging nooses of rope. Above him the sky was iron-grey, full of unfallen sleet. Smoke from the fair's fires rose into it; a hundred straight columns.

'Another black frost tonight,' the cobbler muttered.

The old man didn't answer. Instead he said, 'I hear one of the prisoners is a keeper.'

The cobbler almost sat upright. Then he relapsed on to the rough bench, biting his thumbnail. 'Dear God,' he whispered. 'To hang?'

'To hang. Tomorrow, like all the rest.'

Over the lake the hammering ended, abruptly. The nooses swung, empty, frost already glinting on them.

The pedlar picked up the last needle. He straightened with a groan, then limped over. 'Goods, gentlemen?' he whined. 'Samples of ribbon. Beads. Bright scarves. Something for the wife?'

The cobbler shook his head sourly; the old man smiled. 'Dead, my friend. Long dead.'

'Ah, well.' The pedlar was grey-haired; he eased the crutch wearily under his arm. 'Not even a brooch to put on your coat?'

'Nothing. Not today.'

Indifferently, as if he was used to it, the pedlar shrugged. 'It's a raw day to walk down a long road,' he said quietly.

They looked at him, bemused.

'Fellow's drunk' the cobbler muttered.

The pedlar hobbled away between tents and round a pen of bleating sheep, their small hooves scratching the frozen lake, down to the stall of a pasty-seller where he bought a hot pie and ate half of it, crouched by the heat of an open oven. Grease scorched his fingers through the torn gloves. He bent forward, his long, grey hair swinging out of his hood, but as he pulled himself slightly upright on the crutch a close watcher might have glimpsed, just for an instant, that he was a tall man, and not as old or as crippled as he seemed.

Someone squeezed in beside him. 'Is that for me?'

The pedlar handed over the remains of the pie without comment; the boy who had been cart-wheeling wolfed it down ravenously, barely stopping for breath.

The pedlar's eyes watched the crowd intently.

'Well?'

'Nothing. I tried the password on a woman and she told me to get lost or she'd call the Watch.' Raffi licked every flake of pastry from his fingers, still uneasy at the memory. 'You?'

'Not our contact, no. But I overheard an interesting conversation.'

'What about?'

'A certain black bird.'

Raffi stared up, alarmed. 'Again?' He rubbed his greasy hands nervously on his jerkin, then almost as a reflex unfurled a sense-line and sent it out, but the noisy crowd made him giddy with all their

sensations and arguments and chatter; and under them was only the impenetrable glass-blue barrier of the ice, the vast lake frozen to its depths, the tiny creatures down there sluggish, only half-alive.

'Rumours are getting about,' Galen said grimly. 'Perhaps we have Alberic to thank. His people could never keep secrets.' He glanced round. 'Though such stories may be useful. They'll make people think. Stir their faith.'

Raffi rubbed his cold arms, frowning as the oven door was slammed shut. Then he smiled. 'What would they say if they knew the Crow was right here?'

Galen's rebuke struck him behind his eyes – a mindflare – so that he winced. The keeper stepped closer, his gaunt face hard. 'Will you keep your mouth shut! Don't talk to me unless you have to. And stay close!'

He turned, pushing through the crowd. Eyes wet, furious, Raffi glared after him.

They were both so tense they could barely talk any more. They had been at the fair since yesterday. Every hour they spent here was a sickening danger; there were Watchmen everywhere, and Raffi had been searched once already at a checkpoint. That still made his skin crawl. But Galen wouldn't go until the contact came. And they had no idea who it would be.

All afternoon he tried to keep warm. The cold was numbing. The stalls and awnings were brittle with ice; long, jagged spikes of it that dripped for a few hours at midday and then hardened again in the terrible nights, so that the whole fair was encased in glassy splendour, like the Castle of Halen must once have been.

Despite himself, he thought of Sarres. The hall would be warm there; the Sekoi would be telling

some story, with the little girl, Felnia, curled up on its lap and Tallis, the Guardian of the place, stoking the fire with logs. And Carys. What would she be doing? He wanted to be back there so much that it hurt.

Earlier, someone had thrown a few coppers to him; now to ease his depression he spent it on a small slab of sticky toffee, making sure Galen didn't see. Twisting off a corner he sucked it with delight, trying not to chew, to make the incredible sweetness last. It had been years since he'd tasted anything like it. Five years. Since he'd left home. He saw Galen watching him darkly across a pen of sheep, but he didn't care. Someone jogged his elbow, almost shoving him into the pen.

'Sorry,' the woman said.

'It's all right.' Raffi pocketed the toffee before he dropped it.

She smiled at him. 'Cold makes me clumsy. And it's a raw day to walk down a long road.'

He froze, swallowing the whole lump without tasting it. He glanced at her sidelong; a big farm-woman, fair hair scraped back, a bold, red face. For a cold moment he had no idea what to do; then he sent a sense-line snaking over to Galen, saw the pedlar's head turn instantly, his hasty limping through the crowd.

Raffi took a breath. 'Not if there's a warm welcome at the end of it,' he managed.

Relief flickered in the woman's eyes, brief but unmistakable. 'Is he here?' she muttered.

Raffi caught her arm. 'Beads?' he said in a normal voice. 'Here's your man.'

He dragged her over to Galen. Their eyes met; she picked up objects from the tray at random, examining them.

'Thank God,' she whispered. 'I thought I'd never

find you! We have to get home now, while the place is empty.'

Galen glanced round; Raffi knew he was wary of a trap.

'How far?'

'Three miles. Over the hill. I have a cart outside the West Check-point.'

'Then we go separately. Different exits. Meet outside.'

The woman nodded. She looked resolute.

'What's your name?' Galen asked quietly.

'Caxton. Majella Caxton. You will come?'

'Have faith woman. We won't fail you.'

Dumping the lace, she strode away. Galen watched her, then said. 'Go ahead of me. No contact, whatever happens.'

There was a queue at the check-point. All the entrances to the fair were thronged, because the Watch took a third of all profits, or more if they disliked your face, and everyone had to be checked in and out.

Raffi folded back his sleeve. This was the worst part. Despite the cold, he was sweating.

'Next!'

He crossed to the table and showed the number painted on his wrist. The Watchman perched there flicked through his list. Glancing back, Raffi saw Galen among a group of men carrying wool-bales.

'Canver. Michael?'

He nodded.

'Performer. Ha, I know what that means. Pick-pocket. Beggar.'

'No!' Terrified, Raffi looked up. 'I tumble, juggle.'

'With what?'

'Apples.'

'So where are they?'

He shrugged. 'I ate them.'

'You must think I was born yesterday.' The Watchman was young, with a cruel, thin mouth. 'Turn out your pockets,' he said.

Raffi hadn't expected this. After all, he had no profits. But if they even suspected he was a thief he would lose a hand, and the thought of that made him turn cold.

He dumped two small coins and the toffee.

'Is that it?' The Watchman grinned. 'Come here.'

The search was quick, but thorough. It left him hot with fear and embarrassment, and it found nothing. The Watchman's snort was derisory. 'Hardly worth your coming, was it?' He scooped up the toffee and shoved it in his own pocket. 'Now get lost.'

Trembling with anger and relief, Raffi turned.

He had only taken two steps when the man said, 'Wait.'

Raffi stopped. His heart thudded like a hammer-bird. Slowly he turned; the Watchman smiled coldly, arrogant on the slippery ice. He had a different list in his hand. Glancing down at it again he muttered, 'Come back here.'

Fear is our greatest weapon. Always the agent should look for it. If it is not there, he should create it.

Rule of the Watch

Everything seemed to go quiet.

Raffi barely breathed; his whole body was a rigidity of terror, so that for an instant there was nothing else in the world.

Then, as if from a long distance, he heard Galen at the other table, grumbling to the harrassed Watchman there about the cold, and even the sound of his voice brought Raffi a sliver of courage.

He walked back. 'What?' he muttered, his voice shaky.

The Watchman thrust the paper in his hands. 'Look at that,' he said in a bored voice. 'Have you seen any of them?'

Raffi turned it round.

It was a list of outlaws. Each one was pictured – a brief sketch, and underneath their names, a sum of money for their capture, a list of crimes. He looked at it quickly, then gave it back.

'I can't read,' he lied.

'You can see, can't you! Do you know any of them?'

'No.'

The man leered, his breath smelling of sour beer. 'Well keep your eyes open, bright boy. It'll pay you more than juggling apples.'

Hurrying away, Raffi bit his lip.