

DRAWING DOWN THE MOON

CHAPTER 1

The wizard settled his tall, horned hat on his fiery hair, which blazed even more brightly in the candlelight, and gave the water in the silver scrying bowl one last stir with the willow wand. He stooped to peer into the bowl and cleared his throat.

"What do you see, Mage Quason?" one of his watchers whispered.

Guindal dan Quason looked up from the iron stand that cradled the bowl in the center of the star within the circle. He squinted past the candles set at each of the pentacle's points at the pair of gold guilders who, while they obeyed his orders to stand stockstill and out of the way, craned their necks to peer through the smoke at the wizard's work.

Quason frowned at the men. "Silence!"

The gold dealers shuffled and ducked their heads.

"The celestial spirits demand silence," he intoned in his gravest voice. He plucked at his long beard, braided with brass bells and hawk's feathers, then raised his right hand to rest the tips of his pointed nails against his brow. "I demand silence. I must be able to concentrate," he growled.

The boy who squatted in the workroom's darkest corner, far from the light and smoke, shook his head. This came of letting the man script his own spiel. Still, from what Ela could see as he squinted at the men, they did look suitably impressed by Milord's blatant overacting. Their heads bobbed up and down like fairday mummers' puppets, and they murmured, "Yes, yes, of course, of course; certainly, Mage."

The boy sighed and shrugged. Two days of fattening the men with Cook's minted lamb and roasted squab, two days of pouring them full of the best taleau and wine from the cellars, had led them this far. The contract had been signed and sealed; all that was left was this act to play out, and the pair would be on their way back to Breresford, hopefully to retrieve Cha Praine's missing satchel of buillion.

Yet another coup -- and a ten percent finder's fee -- for the great Mage Quason.

The boy shrugged again and settled more comfortably on his heels. He frowned at the dark round of glass balanced on his knee. Scrying.... He rubbed his temples with his splayed fingers and stared into the blackened mirror. Damned bloody scrying.

The silenced guilders had frozen in place again, and Ela's master turned back to the bowl. The wizard passed the wand over the basin, and the

willow began to glow. Wisps of fire played up and down its length, stopping just above the man's fist. The water glimmered, then bubbled as it began to swirl withershins, faster and faster until it sloshed and splattered from the bowl. As they splashed toward the stone floor, the droplets turned into sparks of blue and green fire.

Again the men outside the circle whispered and squirmed, but Milord merely frowned and tugged at his beard.

Despite the nagging throbbing behind his eyes, Ela smiled at the blank glass. It was an impressive effect, if he had to say so himself.

The wizard peered again into the bowl and raised his arms above his head with the burning wand bowed between his fists. At the cue, Ela thought something that was less than a thought, with no more will or purpose than a bird taking wing, and, when the Mage brought the wand down hard against the bowl's rim, the willow bough exploded in a cloud of purple smoke and ash.

The scrying glass finally shimmered, and Ela stared down into it, focusing his sore eyes on a point beyond the glass. Dim, wavering images took shadowy shape as the boy squinted at the dark dumbshow. He tried to ignore the pounding in his head and the sourness in his belly as he watched the scene unfold in the glass. Not now, he told the rising sickness. Mother,

Lady Moon, not *now*.

His master cleared his throat and chanted, "Oh, great spirits of earth and fire, of water and air, come to me and -- "

Ela lifted a finger from his knee and pointed toward the smoking bowl, sparks and water still spilling from it onto the stone floor. One of the guilders gasped, and the boy raised his head. The tendrils of smoke writhed and twisted together, and in their midst rose an ethereal figure, a hint of hair, a glimpse of breast, the vague shape of a woman made of embers and smoke.

Even Milord stared at the grey specter a moment, then harrumphed and went on with his speech: " -- and aid me in my task. Spirits, dominions, angels of night, give me the knowledge I seek."

Oh, gods, he was going to draw it out, give the fools their gold's worth. Ela set aside the glass, dark once more, and sat down heavily on the floor, his head in his hands. His mouth was filled with bitterness, and his head pounded behind his eyes.

Better hurry the man along, he thought, and he sent out a wisp of power. The candlewicks flared blue and green, then flickered out, leaving the room lit only by the sparks that continued to cascade from the bowl and the woman slowly dancing in the smoke.

"In the name of Saur, I command you, spirits! Speak to me!"

Ela swallowed the sickness in his throat. The light from the fountain of sparks lit the wizard's craggy face and made his heavy-lidded hawk's eyes shine. Ela couldn't see the guilders, but he could hear their appreciative mutters. They were under Milord's spell, his to command, and doubtlessly far more obliging than mythic spirits. It was enough; it had to be, for Ela knew he could manage nothing more before his skull burst.

"I see.... I see...." the Mage rumbled as he lifted his hands over the bowl.

The whispering grew louder, and Ela thought he saw the corners of his master's mouth twitch through his whiskers.

Oh, sweet Mother, don't let them encourage him.

"I... I see --"

The wizard's eyes rolled up in his head, and he collapsed on the floor in a crumple of white silk.

The guilders dared to whisper, "Mage? Mage Quason?"

That's my cue, the boy thought, as he thought the candle waiting beside him alight and rose from his hiding place.

The gold dealers stepped toward the circle.

"Gentlemen, please.... You must not cross the circle. For your

protection, as well as Milord's."

He carefully skirted the chalk circle as he padded silently to the waiting men. He raised the candlestick and glanced at his master's still form as he passed, and he sighed loudly. With a slight shake of his aching head -- an unwise move, his queasy gut reminded him -- the boy stopped before the wizard's clients and bowed a proper court bow to each man that set his head pounding like a bodhran.

"It is, I fear, not unusual for this to happen," he explained in a voice made even quieter than usual by his headache. "The spirits Milord commands are extremely powerful, and often even a mind as brilliant as Milord's is overcome by the messages they bear. He is well," he assured them, "but he must rest now. If you will return to the great hall, Cha Praise, Cha Mellior, I believe Cook has set out a fine nooning for you --" his belly heaved at the thought -- "and there are wine and ale, if you wish, as well."

Cha Mellior stared past him into the pentacle. Ela glanced over his shoulder and shut his burning eyes wearily. *Shiazet!* The bowl continued to spit sparks, and the ghostly woman still shimmered and wavered above it.

Idiot, he scolded himself. An aching head wouldn't excuse such sloppiness, not in Milord's eyes, and he would be lucky if his head and gut were all that ached after Milord's audience was shooed away to hearth and

meat.

"The spirits remain and are, no doubt, even now communing with Milord, for, ah, this is a manner of... of " Get out of *this* one, Elaun i Quason. "...Of meditative trance, in which messages are received from Saur's... messengers." Och, that was lame! He was ashamed to have even these twin fools hear such tripe.

"But... but what about my gold?" Praise asked, wringing his plump white hands.

Gold... thank the Mother it offered such a dependable distraction.

"Milord will tell you what he has learned, anon, when he has rested."

And torn a strip off me for the half-arsed job I've made of this, he thought. He shrugged. "It may be as soon as an hour; it might be late into the afternoon before he recovers."

He began to slowly herd them toward the door with nods and sweeps of his long, knotted sleeves.

"It is different each time, you understand, but I am sure he will have news for you, *chae*. Until then, please enjoy the hospitality of Milord's Keep."

Almost to the door, now.

"If you should have need of anything, gentlemen, please tell Briache,

and she will see to it. One of the housemaids will serve you gentlemen at table. I would, of course, attend you myself, but...."

He glanced back at the man sprawled on the floor, and the furrows between his kohled brows were genuine. How the devil had the man managed to fall that way? It looked damned uncomfortable, which bode even less well for Ela's own comfort. The boy sighed again.

"Oh.... No, no, that's fine, Dj'Elaun. Your first duty's to your master, of course. Of course.... He will be all right, do you think?"

He'll be stiff as hell and fuming, Ela thought. And thirsty. And it'll be worse for him, and me, the longer you stand here nattering, you fat fool, Praine.

To the perplexed men, he said, "Oh, certainly. It's a... a form of psychic exhaustion. He'll rest awhile, and then he'll join you gentlemen."

He smiled as he reached past the quivering guilder for the door's bolt. The smile, at least, had the usual effect, for the man swallowed hard, flicked out his tongue, and licked his plump lips.

His companion grunted and tugged his short surcote down over the cod tied atop his breeches.

Wonderful.... Well, one smile was all they could hope for today, leer as they might. The Keep's hospitality only extended so far. Wine and roast

pig would have to satisfy their appetites this afternoon.

He hoped. Milord was apt to be displeased with him. And it suited Milord to be perverse in how he showed his displeasure sometimes.

Ela sighed again, barely loud enough to hear over the pounding inside his skull, but Cha Praise heard it and fortunately interpreted it differently.

"You're worried about him, of course. We'll let you get to him, then, Dja. He'll be fine? He'll... he'll be able to tell me about the gold?"

Ela assured the men that all would be made clear. He wished that the words sounded as convincing to his own ears as they apparently did to the goldsmiths'. He yanked back the bolt, swung open the thick plank door, and bowed the pair into the hall before they could summon any more questions about gold or magic or his lord.

The boy firmly shut the heavy door, then turned his back to it, dropped the candlestick, and sagged against the rough wood. He slid down the gnarled planks and winced at the whisper of fine silk snagging and tearing on splinters. He settled cross-legged on the floor with his head clutched in his long, white hands.

"I'm getting too friggin' old for this, Ela."

The boy slitted one eye open to watch his master haul himself to his feet. Muttering, the wizard slapped at his damp gown.

"And damn it, brat, next time don't try to drown me. I just had a Saur-damned bath last week."

The man scuffed the chalklines on the floor with his slipper and felt his way across the room to the worktable. As he pawed blindly through the clutter on the huge table, the wizard grumbled, "And got a little close with the fire, too, didn't you? Thought you were going to singe me there for a moment. Hell, Ela, give me some light, blast it. I ain't got your cat's eyes."

"I would gladly trade mine for some moggie's at the moment, Milord," Ela whispered into his lap.

"Well, I can't see in the bleeding dark like you, so kindly get off your arse and make some -- oh...."

The wizard left off his fumbling search and crossed the pentacle to stoop and peer at the boy.

"Give me a fire, Ela," the Mage said softly as he creaked to his knees beside his servant. "Let me see you."

"No, no light, please, Milord," the boy croaked from behind his hands.

"How bad is it?"

"B-b-bad." Ela trembled and tightened his grip on his throbbing skull.

"I didn't think I would get them out of here before -- "

The wizard swayed back from the boy with surprising quickness, but not quickly enough. He swiped at the watery mess on his white gown and grumbled, "Before you heaved up your guts. My second-best robe, too. Damn!"

"I'm sorry, Milord," Ela rasped. "Could Milord give me hell a little more quietly, please?"

He tried a smile but, from the look on his master's face, without as much success as the one he had bestowed on the guilders. The boy tried to get to his feet but only succeeded in sliding down the door again to squat wobbily on his toes against it.

The wizard clawed at his bedraggled beard as he heaved himself to his feet. The man stumbled toward the pentacle, where the sparks spluttered weakly from the scrying bowl and the smoke still swayed and twisted above it, although the figure was even more ghostly now.

The Mage finally managed to unplait a strand of beard, and bells tinkled to the floor and feathers wafted into the sparks.

Quason wrinkled his beak of a nose at the double stink of burned feathers and vomit, spat into the bowl, and muttered, "Damn it, Ela. So," he continued, gazing up at the smoke, "is this the witchwhore? I figure your dam's the only wench you've ever seen naked. Were her teats really that

huge, or do you simply have nasty thoughts about your precious mummy?"

"She was a *bastard's* mother, my lord," Ela said through gritted teeth.

"Ah, yes, no paps at all, then. Not after the priests got through with her. So, you just have a filthy mind."

Ela pried a hand free of his forehead and splayed his fingers as he lifted the hand, palm up. The smoke and sparks swirled together in a spiral, then snaked across the room to his waiting hand. The fire flowed back into him, easing the sickness in his bowels and the harsher fire in his head for a moment. He stared down at his shimmering hand until the magic left it nothing but cold white flesh and bone.

With the witchlight fled, the wizard flailed blindly about, and Ela winced as he heard the man bang into the bowl's heavy iron stand. Muttering through his mustaches, the Mage made his way back to the boy with the bowl, the robe's long sleeves wrapped about his hands to protect them from the hot metal. The wizard thrust the empty bowl into Ela's bare hands. The boy murmured his thanks as he clutched the basin to his belly, and promptly used it.

There were more curses from his master, albeit whispered ones, as the wizard scabbled around the sick boy and slapped the floor here and there with his heavy hands.

Ela raised his head from the makeshift slopbowl and managed to draw a feeble flame to the discarded candlestick.

"Ah ha!" the man crowed as he grabbed up the candle.

"P-please, Milord...", Ela began, but his protest was cut off by another bout of retching.

"So, is it your head or the magicking?" the Mage asked as he hunkered down beside the boy.

"The magick... I think. The headache's usually more cordial and gives me some warning before it visits. I am sorry, Milord."

"Damned inconvenient, brat, but can't be helped." The man unfolded his long legs with creaks and pops that made Ela wince. "Can't, can it?"

"Milord knows more of wizardry than I," Ela muttered into the stinking bowl.

"You through? Puking *and* cheeking me?"

"Gods, I hope so, Milord."

The wizard reached for the bowl, and Ela reminded him, "I imagine it's still warm, Milord."

The man tested the metal with a fingertip before he wrapped his hands again and snatched it away.

"Saur's hairy balls, Ela, but I do wish I could do that. Be damned

handy. However, you'd best get used to handling simple fire, though. That'll burn you, witchling, just like it did the whore."

Ela, made less cautious than usual by his pounding head, opened his mouth, but, before he could say something foolish, his master drew back a hand.

"Not the face, Milord," the boy whispered, and the man smacked the back of his head instead.

When Ela could see again, he peered through bleary eyes at the man solemnly studying the bowl's contents. That was a doctor for you; give a leech a flask of piss, a pile of crap, or a bowl of vomit, and he'd stare and sniff for hours.

Ela very gingerly shook his head, and his master squinted sideways at him.

"What, brat?" the wizard growled.

"Will I live, Milord?"

"Ain't nobody ever died yet of magicking, I reckon."

Tell that to a half a thousand dead witches, Ela thought, but he wisely kept it a thought.

"Phlegm, brat. See?"

The wizard tipped the bowl toward Ela, who shuddered and shut his

eyes.

"I think not, Milord; for the nonce, my belly is calm. I should not care to encourage it to be otherwise."

"Oh, you're feeling better. Getting mouthy." The man set the bowl aside. "More to the point, there's nothing but spit and snot. When the hell'd you eat last?"

Ela shrugged and got another clout for the lapse.

"Forgive me, Milord," he managed to whisper. "Yesterday, Milord." He sighed as honesty made him add, "I think."

"Idiot."

"Yes, Milord."

"If you needed purging, brat, -- "

Ela laughed. "I believe it's rather too late for that, Milord."

"Oh, you're feeling much better." The wizard stretched and dropped a bony arm across the boy's shoulders. "Still, it was a damned fine show, brat. The wraith was a very nice touch. You sure it wasn't the witch?"

"It was not my mother," Ela hissed between clenched teeth.

"Well, whoever she was, I noticed she had Brast adjusting his cod."

The smokedancer hadn't been the cause -- well, not entirely -- of the guilders' discomfort, but Ela kept that to himself as well. Even when it came

to business, Milord didn't want him too free with his smiles.

"So, what did I see, brat?"

"What did the 'celestial spirits' reveal, Milord?" Ela asked gravely.

"Or are you in too profound a state of 'psychic exhaustion' to tell me, bratling?" The man slapped Ela's thigh, grumbled at the boy's wince, and went on, "Is that something from one of your precious books, Ela, or'd you just pull it out of your scrawny arse? I like it; store it in that witchy brain of yours, lad. Psychic exhaustion!"

He roared a laugh that set Ela's head to throbbing harder, then fell silent and grave.

"I *am* getting my five hundred, ain't I, brat? Please tell me the fool didn't spirit away his own gold? He's not likely to pay me for proving he's a thief."

The Mage clamped one clawlike hand on the boy's hunched shoulder and raked his beleagured beard with the other.

"Of course, if he is the culprit...." His lean, sharp face brightened. "He might pay even more to keep his hand and his back whole. Either way, the man's a thief or a fool. How anyone could lose track of five thousand's worth of gold is beyond -- "

"Cha Praine, Milord, could lose his own arse, another not

inconsiderable item," Ela muttered.

"It ain't for you to judge the likes of him. And it's his kind that keeps you in silk and shiny gee-gaws like this," the wizard reminded him, as a long, clawed fingernail flicked the gold-mounted ruby that hung from the boy's earlobe.

Ela began the expected response: "I beg Milord to forgive me, if I am -- "

"Get on with it," his master growled.

The boy folded his legs tailor-wise, clasped his hands in his lap, and closed his eyes.

He whispered, "I saw a man, Milord, with coppery hair -- not so bright as Milord's -- balding here and here." The boy raised his beringed fingers to his temples and brushed his drooping, white elflocks from his brow. "Stooped a bit, and thin. Almost as thin as I... Almost. He gave a bundle to a short man, a heavy man with a cropped beard and a woolen cloak with fox tails down the front, like so -- " Ela drew his hands down the front of his gown from the wide gold collar about his throat to his jeweled belt.

"This bundle.... Did it jingle? Clink?"

Ela sighed and slitted his eyes open. "It's called a *seeing* for good

reason, Milord."

"Watch your hole, brat. Saur knows, I'm bein' soft and easy with you, seeing as you're ailing, but, if this is how you thank me for my charity, a few licks might make -- "

"I'm sorry, Milord, to be so difficult. Forgive me, Milord."

The wizard grunted his doubt in the boy's sincerity, but he waved his hand for the boy to go on.

Ela shut his eyes again. "The fat man gives the thin one a bag," he whispered. "And, no, Milord, I don't know if it clinked either." He eased one silver eye open. Sweet Mother, you'd think he liked the sting of the little quirt.... "Forgive -- "

The wizard cut him off. "Hell, it can always clink when I tell it. Details, boy; they love details...." The Mage raked his beard, pulling out the last scrap of ribbon, and pursed his thin lips. "Promising, definitely promising.... Still, you did put the usual disclaimer in the contract, didn't you, Ela-ra?"

Ela felt his face warm at the unexpected endearment. He waited for his master to laugh at his blush and make one of the usual lewd remarks. When the man surprisingly held his tongue, Ela dully quoted the clause, "Magick is an art and not a science, and, as such, knowledge gained by such

art is not recognized as evidential in any Lae Ran court of law... Of course, Milord."

Ela went on, in his small, whispery voice, with both eyes screwed shut and the long fingers of one hand massaging both his temples, "I did not mean to cheek Milord, before, but scrying is decidedly not one of my gifts."

"As long as the idiot can't haul me before the Tan's council. And, more importantly, nor can the bigger fool he accuses. It's not a bad description, at that. Short and sweet, but I think he'll recognize his precious thief from it." The man creaked to his feet. "Well, I'm off to dazzle 'em with my brilliance as a seer, brat. Have this mess cleaned up when I get back."