

TAMORA PIERCE



BEKA COOPER BOOK TWO

BLOODHOUND

A TORTALL LEGEND

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A TORTALL LEGEND

TORTALL BOOKS BY TAMORA PIERCE

BEKA COOPER TRILOGY

Terrier

Bloodhound

Mastiff



TRICKSTER'S DUET

Trickster's Choice

Trickster's Queen



PROTECTOR OF THE SMALL QUARTET

First Test

Page

Squire

Lady Knight



THE IMMORTALS QUARTET

Wild Magic

Wolf-Speaker

Emperor Mage

The Realms of the Gods



THE SONG OF THE LIONESS QUARTET

Alanna: The First Adventure

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The Woman Who Rides Like a Man

Lioness Rampant



Tortall and Other Lands: A Collection of Tales

Young Warriors: Stories of Strength

BEKA COOPER

BOOK TWO

BLOODHOUND

TAMORA PIERCE

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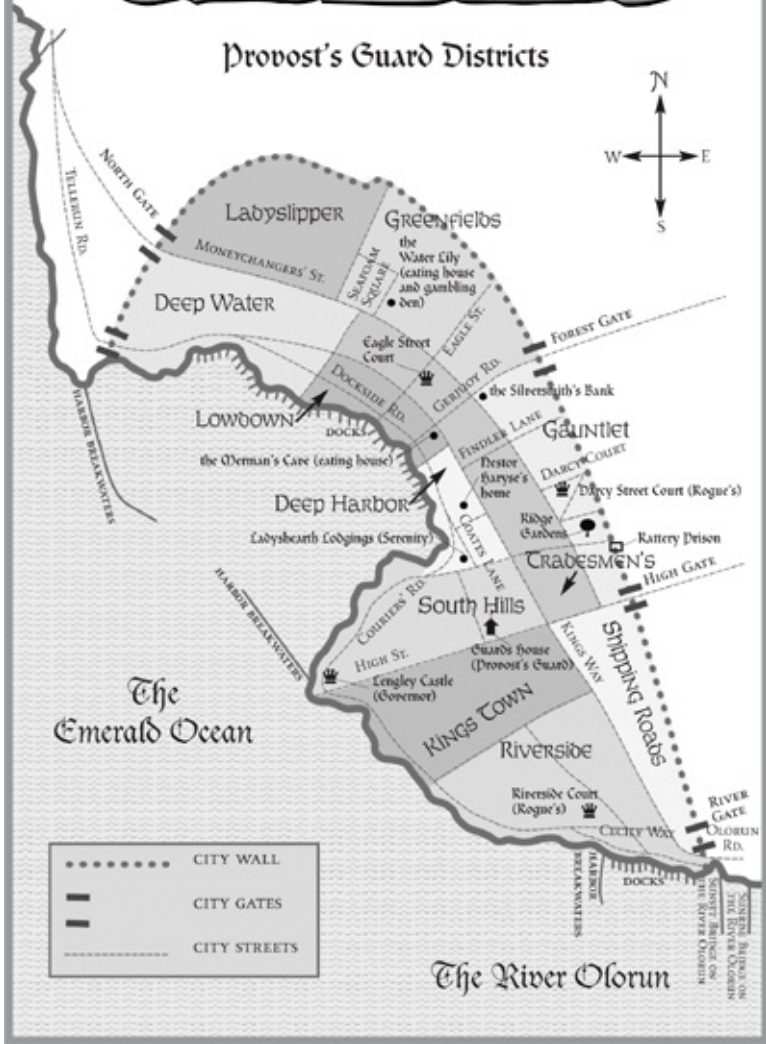
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*I want to dedicate this long-delayed second volume of
Beka's adventures to my assistants,
Sara Alan and Cara Coville.
I think that without them
I might well have gone just plain nuts.
I would also like to dedicate this book to
Joel Sweifach, my first accountant.
Joel, you kept my ship afloat!*

Port Caynn, 247 H.E.

Provost's Guard Districts



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Thursday, September 6, 247 H.E.

I should have known tonight's watch would kiss the mule's bum when Sergeant Ahuda stopped me after baton training. "A private word, Cooper," she told me, and pulled me into a quiet corner of the yard. Her dark eyes were sharp on my face. We'd gotten on well since I'd finished my Puppy year and in my five months' work as a Dog. I couldn't think what I might have done to vex her.

"Your reports have gotten sloppy." That was Ahuda, never one to soften her words. "You leave out detail, you skip what's said. You used to write the best reports of any Puppy or first-year Dog, but not of late. Have you slacked on the memory exercises?"

I gazed at the ground. Of course I've been slacking. What's the use, with partners like I've had? Ahuda put her brown fist under my chin and thrust my head up so I'd look her in the eye. "Shall I send you back to Puppy training for a refreshing in memory study?"

"Sarge, please don't." The plea left my mouth before I could stop the words. Goddess, not Puppy training again, not even one class! I'd never hear the end of it!

Ahuda took her fist away and propped it on one of her sturdy hips. "Then however you kept your memory quick before, start doing it again. Steel yourself, wench! You're not the only first-year Dog with partners who are less than gold. Work with it!"

She marched back to the kennel. I went to wash and put on my uniform. We had the Happy Bag to collect tonight, me and my partner Silsbee. Our route took us along Fortunetellers' Walk, where I'd be sure to find a shop that sold journal books. I'd thought I wouldn't need to keep one after my Puppy year, but if Ahuda was complaining of my reports, it was time to start again.

I didn't even have Pounce to make me feel better as we mustered for the Evening Watch. The cat had stopped coming with us three days after I'd been partnered with Silsbee. I'd begged him to come. It was Pounce's remarks about folk, and about Silsbee himself, that made it easier for me to walk patrol with the man, but Pounce would have none of it.

He bores me, and he only lets you do boring things, too, my annoying constellation cat said. I see no reason why both of us should be bored.

And so I went out to collect our Happy Bag's worth of bribes with Silsbee and no one else, listening to him jabber about the meal his wife had prepared before he came on watch. Those huge meals are one reason that when we reached our patrol route, I visited all the shopkeepers with businesses

upstairs. On Fortunetellers' Walk they went up three and four stories, each room with a crystal reader, or a palm reader, or any other kind of reader. Silsbee stood below and blabbered with the ground-floor shopkeepers. They brought him drinks and cakes, stupid loobies. Did they think *he'd* run after the Rat that stole their goods? I did all the climbing in the miserable heat, just as I would run down their Rats when they came.

We gathered the Happy Bag and finished our watch. Ersken invited me to supper with him, his partner Birch, and some of the others, but I was in no mood for it. I just don't feel like I earn that extra bit from the Happy Bag with Silsbee dragging at me all the time. It makes me feel low.

I was walking through the kennel courtyard when I noticed that Silsbee waited by the gate. He crooked a finger at me. "A word with ye, Cooper," he said.

My temples banged. The last thing I wanted was any kind of speech with that sheep biter when I was off duty, but he was my senior partner. I went to him.

"I'll speak with Sergeant Ahuda, but ye've the right to know first. I'm requestin' a new partner." He dug at his teeth with a wooden pick. "Ye really deserve that name they give ye, Terrier. Y' *are* a Terrier. Ye make me nervous, with yer hands and feet twitchin' and yer teeth grindin', allus wantin' t' chase after every wee noise and squeak. Even in this weather! If I was younger—but I ain't. It's best we say we're not suited before we get fond."

"You're cutting me loose." I said it slow, just to be sure I had it right. It *hurt*, to hear the nickname I was so proud of turned against me.

"Ye give me fidgets." He shrugged and held out his hands as if to say, "What am I to do?"

"You—" I said, trying not to show my fury. "Do you know how many Rats I could have caught and hobbled, had you not held me back?"

"Now, Cooper, don't make me write ye up for sauce." He waved that disgusting toothpick at me. There was a chunk of something on its end.

"You want to hear *sauce*?" Two weeks of working with the louse boiled over and out of my mouth. "You walk a bit, and you stop for a jack of ale. Then you stroll a block or three, till you need 'a wee tidbit,' as would feed a family of five. A cove gets his pocket picked? 'We'll have Day Watch pick that Rat up,' you say. 'There's folk with children to feed on Day Watch as can use the bribes.' Someone cries murder a street over? 'Plenty of folk hereabouts put up a shout because they like to make me run. I ain't a-fallin' for *that* trick again.' Once we get there, any Rats are *gone*—it's enough to make a mot *scream*."

"I'm beginnin' t' see why ye're not well favored when it comes to partners, Cooper," he said. "Ye say nothin' for days, then ye talk sewer muck."

He strolled into the kennel, as smug as a tax man with soldiers at his back. I stood there, shaking, my hands clenched so tight around my new-bought

journal that they cramped.

When I came home, Pounce was waiting for me outside Mistress Trout's lodgings. *They'll give you back to Goodwin and Tunstall*, he said, without me even telling him what had happened. *You know you'll be better with them. I will, too. I've been bored.*

"I want my *own* partner," I told him, stomping inside. "Goodwin and Tunstall are a pair. I don't want to be a third forever. I want a *good* partner, like Erskens has in Birch."

Your time will come, Pounce told me.

"When!" I cried. I had no fear of being shushed by my neighbors. My fellow lodgers are Rats, in attendance on the King of Thieves at night. "When! You're the god, aren't you? Tell me!"

I am not a god. I am a constellation. It isn't the same thing. Pounce jumped up on my shoulder and began to purr as I unlocked my door. His side was warm against my cheek.

"Stop that," I said. "It won't do any good." But of course it did. It always does. As he kneaded my shoulder muscles, I sighed and sat upon my bed. Pounce's black fur was like the softest velvet under my fingers. The knots in my temples and jaw loosened. By the time he jumped to my pillow, I was able to change into my nightdress, make myself a soothing tea, eat some bread and cheese, and open this journal. I thought that writing what took place with Silsbee would ease me further, but I have finished, and I am still too angry to sleep. I may as well put down a bit of what has taken place since I finished my last journal, while I was still in training.

I am seventeen years old now, a full member of the Provost's Guard. I have been so for five months. In that time I have had four partners, including Silsbee. My luck in this area has not been good. Between partners I go back to my training Dogs, Goodwin and Tunstall. I remain with the Jane Street kennel of the Lower City watch district, which is yet under the command of Acton of Fenrigh. Kebibi Ahuda is my Watch Sergeant and trainer in baton work.

I live in Mistress Trout's lodgings on Nipcopper Close. My fellow lodgers are Aniki Forfrysning, Koramin Ingensra, and Rosto the Piper, as well as Mistress Trout. Rosto, the Rogue and king of the city's thieves, tried to buy the house and turn it into an inn where his court might gather, but Mistress Trout refused to sell. Instead she persuaded him to buy houses across the street that are also hers. He's had the builders there ever since, turning them into a spacious inn. The work is near enough to done that we've been taking our regular breakfasts on the second floor. Rosto is naming the place after his dead mother. He tells us she was once a beautiful Player called the Dancing Dove.

Rosto still makes it plain he wants me. I yet say no, though nights like this one come when I wonder why I refuse him. Still, a cove as makes a living by violence will live all his life by it, that's my fear. It's no help that Rosto's the

Rogue and I'm a Dog.

Curse him for being all tight muscle, with ivory skin and a mouth as soft as rose petals. Curse him for having hair as fair as the sun, and eyes as black as night. Curse him for having the grace of a cat and deft, cool hands.

And now I am having the same argument on paper that I have in my own head, or with Pounce, on too many nights. I know my choice is sensible, but it isn't my common sense I think with, those times Rosto's stolen a kiss from me.



Pounce says I am to stop feeling sorry for myself and get to bed, or he will ruin another good page with his inky paws. I must sleep sometime. But when I do, tomorrow comes, and I deal again with being partnerless.



Curse that cat! I'm off to bed, now that my new journal is started. No thanks to Pounce!

Friday, September 7, 247

Noon.

I knew I had to tell my friends straight off. Ersken Westover would hear of my dismissal when we went on watch, if our thief friends hadn't already caught wind of it, so Pounce and I went across the street to breakfast at the Dancing Dove, Pounce more eagerly than me. Most of our regular group was there—Rosto, Aniki, Kora, Ersken, and Phelan. All but Tansy, and I chose not to wait for her. With a baby, a husband, and a business, she doesn't always come. I wanted to get the telling over with.

"Silsbee tossed me back last night," I said as Kora passed the turnovers.

For a moment they all did naught but stare.

Then Ersken snorted, pox rot him. Dogs ought to show a united front! Kora put up her hands to cover her mouth. Mages are always discreet. Aniki cackled. Soon they all made merry at my expense, save Rosto.

He didn't laugh. He only raised an eyebrow and said, "That's four partners, then."

I glared at him. I can do that, seeing as how he's got a sweet spot for me. "So?" I asked. "It's not always a good fit, right off. I've said it afore. Even Ersken had two partners."

"I got lucky the second go-round." Finally Ersken remembered whose side he was on. "It was pure chance that Vinehall was transferred and I got Birch. And it wasn't Beka's fault that her first partner didn't work. He died of the red flux. Half the Lower City got it this summer, even you, Rosto. It's not like she gave it to him."

"She arrested the second cove herself," Aniki said. "She arrested her own partner!"

"He took a bribe to ignore *murder*," I said, still angry. "That's just wrong."

"You told the third one you'd lop his hands off if he put them on you again." Kora could barely say it for giggling. "He thought you'd really do it, too!"

"She would!" Rosto, Aniki, and Ersken said at the same time.

"So what was it with this one?" asked Phelan. He was offering ham to my cat. Pounce, the traitor, tended to that, not to helping me.

"Silsbee." I was tired to death of the subject already and the day scarce begun. "He says I give him the twitches. And he's a lazy, jabbernob, pudding-livered scut." I'd said little to them before. I had been trying to make the best

of things, but there was no reason to now. “He eats, he gossips, and he wouldn’t chase a Rat if it was a feeble filcher under his own poxy nose!”

They only laughed all the more. I wondered where Tansy was. My oldest friend would surely stand up for me. Why, today of all days, was she not here?

“I’d say you have curst bad luck,” Aniki told me, “but the god’s truth is, Beka, you want to bag every Rat in the Lower City, and Silsbee is a known slug. The odds were down to fifty to one that it would last another week.”

“I’d’ve stuck it out!” I cried.

“You won plenty of folk some coin when he didn’t resign after one night of you,” Rosto said idly. “Even more coin when you didn’t quit the Dogs by the third day. But no one would wager a copper on it going a whole month.”

I had wagered on me making it to a month. That only means I’m a looby. I *tried* not to argue with Silsbee when he’d refused to let me give chase. I hadn’t questioned his orders, though my tongue was sore from biting it. I hadn’t wanted to lose yet another partner.

“Doubtless he thought you were surly, as shy as you are with them that don’t know you.” Rosto said it like he was my wise old grandfather. “I’d’ve thought Goodwin and Tunstall would have made you more sociable with the other Dogs.”

“I talked to him,” I snapped. “For all the good it did me.”

“Goodwin and Tunstall didn’t make her *that* sociable,” Ersken said. He was trying to feed Kora’s cat, Fuzzball, without bleeding for it. Fuzzball could be greedy at times, and his claws were sharp. “Why should they? They’re happy when Beka gets kicked back to them, even though my Lord Provost told Ahuda the other day that he wants *two* good pairs, not one great team of three.”

I hid my face in my hands. I don’t want my lord to be unhappy with me. It’s not just that he’s my sponsor, or the head of the Provost’s Guards. I want to repay him for taking my family out of the Lower City and giving us a decent life. “When did you hear this?” I asked.

“Three days back,” Ersken said. I heard wickedness in his voice as he added, “When he noticed that Silsbee rolled his eyes as you came within his view.”

Pounce jumped onto my shoulder as I moaned.

Why are you groaning? he asked me. *My lord would see you commit murder before he’d stop liking you.*

My friends looked curious. This time they heard Pounce only speaking in cat, not in human speech as I did, or they would have laughed. Half the time he lets them know what he is saying, and half the time he does not. He likes to tease, does Pounce.

Feet clattered up the stair. Tansy had forgotten to take off the wooden

pattens she wore to lift her feet clear of the street muck. She flung the breakfast room door wide. Her rain hat was askew, her gold curls tumbling from their pins. She threw her rain cape on the floor and banged a basket of rolls on the table before us. Her cheeks were red, her eyes sparkling with anger.

"I have never been so humiliated!" she said, panting from her run up from the common room floor.

"You tracked mud in here. The wood's not stained yet," Rosto told her. He is as picky as a cat about this inn he's building.

Tansy glared at him. "Mud scrubs off," she said tartly. "It's not dignified for the Rogue to worrit himself about housekeeping." She was vexed, sure enough. Her Upmarket speech was slipping into the Lower City cant of our childhood. Bending, she slipped off her pattens, setting them outside the room's door.

Aniki poured Tansy a cup of hot tea. "Your day off to a bad start?" she asked as Tansy put on a pair of the slippers kept by the door for us.

"Baker Garnett tested the coin I gave him—and it was false! A silver cole, a thin coating over brass!" Tansy sat next to me and ripped a roll in two. "He had guards in the shop. One of them grabbed me. I gave him the knee in the cod, the scut. *Then* my dozy footman got into it. A flea I put in my cove's ear, not stopping the plaguey bastard before handling a citywoman like me!" She took a gulp of the tea and winced. It was too hot.

"Most citywomen don't jam knees into a cove's cod." Rosto spoke seriously, but his black eyes were laughing.

Tansy shook her head, blushing fiercely. "You don't *understand*," she said. "I've worked so hard to give our business an honest name! Dealing in *coles*—it would be the ruin of me and my whole family, if word got about. No one would buy from us! We'd lose everything!"

"And there's being boiled in oil, if they think you guilty of colesmithing," Kora murmured while she played with Aniki's cat. "Or getting your hand lopped off if they just think you're passing fakes along. Why *aren't* you in the cages?"

"I bribed the baker, of course," Tansy said, and sniffed. I took out one of the handkerchiefs she tucked in her clothes and put it in her hand. "He called off his guard when I wouldn't stop crying.... *And* he said he's had two other good customers come in with false coins. Silver, all of them." She blew her nose. "He let me go, but folk were *laughing*, and that rusher who worked for him said *such* a thing to me!"

"I'll send a cove around to have a word," Rosto said. "Don't you worry about that, love."

"Try not to make it a matter for the Dogs," Ersken told him. "Friendly is always best."

Rosto gave Ersken a grin that was all teeth. "I'm the friendliest cove around, Westover," he said. "Ask anyone."

"Living," Aniki murmured.

Rosto glanced at her. "Well, it's Beka you ask if you want to talk to the dead ones, isn't it?" he inquired, all innocent-like.

Fuzzball attacked my fingers. I let him do it, as I was thinking. This baker, Garnett, had seen three customers lately with false silver coins? Respectable folk at that. Tansy's grandfather-in-law had been the Lower City's worst scale and landlord, but since his death Tansy, her husband, and her mother-in-law had gotten rid of the old man's crooked businesses. They'd lost a great deal of money to get straight with the law.

I'd bet a copper of my own that these three false silver cases Tansy mentioned aren't the only ones, not if a *baker* is hiring guards. How many silver coins does a baker see in a day? Most folk buy with coppers, unless they shop for a group, or a big household.

"It's not *you* that's behind this, is it?" Tansy asked Rosto. "Because it would be wrong, very wrong! I don't care if you are the Rogue, I'll speak my mind! You can't meddle with people's livelihood, Rosto! Silver coles hurt us all. If a silver noble won't buy what it's supposed to—"

"Will you *hush*?" Rosto asked, slapping the table. "Mithros's sack, woman!"

Tansy went silent, but she was breathing hard.

"You should learn from Beka," Rosto said. "She says her bit and then waits for a cove to answer. No, I've no hand in these fakes. If you'd a whit of sense, you'd know it. Coles hit the Court of the Rogue even harder than they hit the merchants. You make a bit of coin at first, but if the price of silver goes down, it goes down for all. We'd be cutting our own throats to deal in coles."

Tansy sniffed and blew her nose again. Even as a little girl she would never admit she let her tongue run away with her. "Then you'll keep an eye out?" she asked Rosto. "Afore there's folk begging in the street this winter?"

Ersken and I both sat up. "Hear now!" I said. "Catching colesmiths is Dog business!"

Tansy made a rude noise. "This is *serious*, Beka," she said. "This is *money*. Were it a killer, I'd come to you two, of course I would. But Garnett's hired guards. He's afraid *he'll* be arrested for counterfeit passing, at the least. He's so fearful he's willing to risk offending good customers. That's more than Lower City Dogs can manage, unless maybe it's Goodwin and Tunstall. And you haven't got them, only old flat-footed Silsbee."

"She hasn't got him, either," Aniki said with a smirk.

That distracted Tansy from money, sure enough. She turned to gawp at me, then rolled her eyes. "Mother's milk, Beka, what happened *this* time? Did you kill him?"

I got up and left, Pounce at my side. So much for hoping Tansy would stand

by me. She was more worried about her purse than her oldest friend.

No more can I blame her, despite my stung feelings. She's come a long way from Mutt Piddle Lane, where we both once lived. To be accused of passing false money like a common street mot would have skewered her deeper than any sword. And coles in the marketplace meant her silver that she worked so hard for might not be worth the value stamped on it. She'd be smelling Mutt Piddle Lane just outside her door, if I knew Tansy. Goddess knows I would.

As I climbed the stairs to my garret rooms, I told myself that Goodwin and Tunstall would be glad to take me back. Though I curse when I don't succeed with a new partner, I do like going out with my old ones. We find Rats, and we cage them. Not one- and two-copper Rats, but *big* ones. Each time Ahuda puts me with Tunstall and Goodwin, I can hear the Lower City's Rats groan.

Inside my rooms, I collected my pack, putting bags of cracked corn and bread pieces in it. I made sure it also held my pouches of dirt from all over Corus. I was still thinking about Goodwin and Tunstall as I locked up again. It would be different if one of them took a promotion to Sergeant, like both of them have been offered. Goodwin's a Corporal, Tunstall's a Senior Dog who's turned down promotion to Corporal because he hates the extra writing. I'd happily pair with either of them. But they've been partnered as street Dogs for years. They don't even have to talk, most of the time, they know each other's minds so well. I'd like to have my *own* partner like that.

Have faith that the gods know what they are doing with your life, Pounce said, following me down the stairs.

I don't want the gods meddling with my life, I told him silently as we walked out into the street again. *I want to do it myself. Gods are trouble.*

You don't have a choice, Pounce said.

I don't like the sound of that. I don't like it at all. *I can manage on my own, tell them that!* I said, glaring at him. *And you never mentioned anything like this before!*

I thought it would cheer you up, Pounce said.

I began to trot, not to escape Pounce so much as to get away from what he was hinting at. I've accepted for five year gone that Pounce is magic. Kora was the one who first told me he was a constellation, as close to a god as makes no difference. But he's never spoken of the gods in my life before, and I wish he hadn't. Look at all the folk who have had the gods muck with their lives, folk like Jehane the Warrior, that was burned alive, or Tomore the Righteous, beggared and beheaded, or Badika of the Blazing Axe, who drove off the Carthakis, only to be torn apart in one of their arenas! It never goes well for the god-chosen! Pounce can just tell the gods to leave me be.

Pounce and I got to Glassman Square, where one of my flocks of pigeons was waiting for us, as they do every day. We settled there, me to feed them, Pounce to watch. Slapper was the first to land on me, as ever. I think old Slapper is a high priest among the pigeons, the way he commands the others,

here and elsewhere in the city. His blue-black feathers were wet and gleaming today. He must've come straight from a bath in the square's fountain.

I steadied his clubfoot with my hand, not looking him in his staring yellow eyes. He's got tiny, tiny pupils. No one ever thinks of pigeons as mad, but I think Slapper has carried so many ghosts that he's cracked in the nob with it. He'll hit me as soon as look at me, for all I feed him corn and wrap warm cloths around his clubfoot in cold weather. Ungrateful feather duster. Now *there's* one that's god-touched.

I gathered the complaints of the dead from the pigeons while they ate. There were few ghosts complaining of their lot today. None of them said anything I could pass on as good information to my fellow Dogs. Slapper had no ghost at all. He hasn't carried one for more than a week. I wonder if he misses them, or if he is glad not to have some dead human moaning in his ear. I wonder, too, if the Black God ever asks the pigeons if they want to carry ghosts.

On we went to see my dust spinners. For them I brought packets of dust, gravel, and dirt from other parts of town. Stuck in one place like they are, their veils of air spinning tall or small depending on the weather, they savor the taste of other places. In return they give me the bits of talk they've gathered since my last visit.

They're funny creatures, spinners. I don't know how old they are. When I was small, I learned to gather conversations from Hasfush, the one I met first. I think Hasfush is the oldest of the city spinners. My Granny Fern, who taught me how to use this family magic, told me my five-times-great-grandda had listened to Hasfush.

Today we called on Hasfush first. He was spinning short, a whirl of dust, leaves, and tiny stones that rose barely a foot into the air. It was all he could manage with the weather so hot and still. When I entered his circle, I gave him a nice packet of grit from the Daymarket. That cheered him so much that he sped up, growing and rising to my shoulders. He released all the bits of conversations he'd collected over the last week, giving them to my hearing.

As ever, much of it was sheer nonsense, a handful of words or less. There were even pieces in a language that I *think* was Yamani. That was a guess. I've only heard it spoken twice.

Then I heard, "—at this! I won eight silver nobles off the mammerin' scut, an' six of 'em is coles!" It was a cove who spoke, a whiny one.

A mot replied to him. "So find a game and lose 'em to someone else. You want—"

Those two voices were gone.

The next whole bit that I heard sent goose bumps all over me.

"—rot in the rye?" That was a mot, an old one.

"All that rain they've had in the northeast this summer." This was a

younger mot, all business. "We'll be lucky if this year's rye harvest is half what last year's was."

"We will sell the rotten stuff. Mix it well with the good. None will notice." The old mot's voice was hard.

"Are you mad? That stuff kills! I'll have no—"

That mot left the old one, from the sound of her voice.

Hasfush was empty of his week's gatherings. I ground my teeth. I would have liked the name of the mot who wished to sell rotten rye, which brings madness and death. It wasn't Hasfush's fault that the two mots had moved on, nor was it a care of his. Spinners take no interest in what comes to them on the breeze.

I thanked him. Then Pounce and I moved on to visit two more Lower City spinners and more pigeons. Neither spinner had anything about coles. One pigeon carried a ghost who nattered about grain crops overall.

I'd give my news to Sergeant Ahuda. The grain inspectors would get the word to check the rye, at least. Hasfush had done the city a favor. I'd add some spices to his next packet. He always likes those. I know by the way his breezes warm as they circle me.

Troubling as the crop news was, my regular meetings with spinners and pigeons did raise my spirits some. We now had advance word on the rye, so I didn't feel so useless. And I'll get another partner. Ahuda wants me to do well. She'd assigned me to Goodwin and Tunstall in the first place. She will keep trying me on whichever Dog is partnerless until the right one turns up. And when it doesn't work out, Goodwin and Tunstall will take me back.

It could be worse. I could have been sent to one of the other districts, which is the *last* thing I want. I belong in the Lower City. The Lower City needs Dogs like me, Dogs that love it for all its bad and good faces.

Once I'd used up all my bird feed and talked to my spinners, I made my way home. I meant to do some cleaning and to write in this journal, but Tansy waited for me on the doorstep of my lodging house.

"I'm sorry," she said before I could open my gob. "I'm sorry I didn't wait for your news. I'm sorry Silsbee is a looby and a lazy one at that." Her eyes were puffy. "Beka, I need a favor." Pounce leaped into her arms and licked her cheek. "Dearest cat, that's sweet, but it scratches. My skin looks dreadful from weeping as it is." To me she said, "Beka, please—come home and help me test my silver."

I stared at her.

Tansy kept her voice very quiet when she said, "Beka, Garnett cut *three* of my coins. I had five silver coins in my purse this morning, and two of them were false. *Two of five*. If the rest of my house money is like that ... My man is too hotheaded—he'll talk. I trust only you to keep it secret."

My tripes turned into a knot. I knew each soul in that household, from the