

Rahelu zigzagged her way up the face of the Eastcliffs until she reached the top, puffing heavily. She shielded her eyes against the sun to look up at the tall boulder that sat like some sentinel's watchtower at the very edge of the cliffs, above the Eastward. Its base was twice as large as her parents' hut and two of its sides sloped outwards as it rose from the large plateau—the seaward side extending precariously far beyond the clifftop over the foaming surf at least two hundred strides below.

Rahelu circled around to the south side of the boulder and climbed up until she found Onneja at the very top, seated cross-legged upon the bare rock with her eyes closed and her back against the sun, facing west into the future. The Conclave journeymage looked unspeakably wise, radiant with power like the legendary archmages of old, with the way the morning rays glinted off her cropped, silvered hair.

"Onneja." Rahelu bowed to the journeymage, her resonance aura still in flux. "I—"

She floundered, unsure of exactly what she should say. *'I am here as you asked'* was obvious and therefore redundant; what she really wanted to blurt out the most was *'I would ask of you a favor'*, but though the Conclave journeymage clearly had a soft spot for her and did not mind questions, Rahelu had lived for far too long in Ennuost Yrg now, to the point that every time she addressed Onneja by her given name (as was Chanazian custom) instead of by title (as was Aleznuaweithish custom), Rahelu felt as if she were being improperly informal.

"—I am glad to see you."

"Come and meditate with me, nela," the Conclave journeymage said, the Chanazian words floating past on the restless seabreeze. "There is still another span or two before I must leave."

Rahelu hesitated.

Meditate?

Part of her wanted to sit down immediately, to settle into the familiar rhythms of the first meditation she had ever learned—the basic four-count meditation that was universal to both Guild and Conclave—the one that Onneja had taught her six years ago, before Rahelu had learned how to worry.

But she had to get to the Guild quickly, before the queue for common-born would-be Petitioners became so long that she would have to wait all day, leaving her mother to work alone.

Lightning crackled through the muted red of her resonance aura; it turned a bright crimson a heartbeat later. Rahelu blushed, trying to tamp her emotions down.

She was *not* a child any longer, to be ruled by every passing emotion.

She ruled her emotions, with iron control and ice cold logic.

*Patience*, she told herself, trying to force her aura back to a calm pale blue. *Onneja has helped me before. She may be willing to help me again. And if she sponsors me, I can make up for the lost time.*

Her aura remained a stubborn yellow-crackled crimson.

She tried telling herself there was a faint suggestion of blue about the edges and the edges did change—to a paler yellow.

“Sit,” Onneja said, indicating the space in front of her without opening her eyes.

The word was an invitation—one supported by the Conclave journeymage’s tone and resonance aura—but Rahelu still felt it as a command.

She folded her legs and sat, facing Onneja and east, into the past. While the Conclave journeymage had never been a woman of many words and Rahelu didn’t truly know her, having only seen her thrice before, she did seem more withdrawn than usual. If her past two visits had been anything to go by, Onneja ought to have inquired after Rahelu’s studies by now.

“Is something wrong?” Rahelu asked.

There was a long pause, before Onneja opened her eyes and answered. “I do not know. The winds of Fortune feel strange lately.” Her gaze focused on Rahelu. “I would ask of you a favor.”

“Yes,” Rahelu said, without waiting for the details.

Onneja raised her eyebrows. “You consent so easily?”

“You’ve already done so much for me and my family,” Rahelu said. “Whatever favor I can give, it will never be enough to repay you.”

She thought of all the troubles they had avoided on road thanks to the extra security of traveling with a Conclave journeymage for a week. How easily they had been able to cross the border into Aleznuaweite, with an experienced guide to steer them, someone fluent in the language to interpret and a respected mage to vouch for their character. The tidbits of wisdom from a master of the resonance disciplines, gathered over decades of practice, freely shared with a little girl who constantly hovered around and didn’t have enough training to appreciate the priceless value of those insights until years later.

And then Rahelu thought of her Petition, tucked into the waistband of her trousers, wondered if she could ask a small favor in return, then decided she should wait until she had actually delivered on the favor Onneja asked, lest she undermine her own declaration of endless debt.

Which, as she had just pointed out, would do nothing to balance the scales, but it was the principle that mattered.

“Anaz,” she said, even though she was no true apprentice of Onneja’s or the Conclave or even truly Chanazian any longer. “How may I serve you?”

“I need your help to perform an Augury,” Onneja said. “One that spans the next decade, perhaps longer.”

An Augury! Interest stirred and orange spirals rose in Rahelu’s aura, overriding all her worries. Mages with the talent for true Augury—the ability to feel future resonances echoes of events on the

timescale of lifetimes and centuries—were exceedingly rare; perhaps only one or two in a generation. So rare that anyone with the slightest ability to Augur more than a handful years into the future was automatically guaranteed a place as a Supplicant, whether they submitted a Petition or not.

She finished processing the rest of Onneja's statement half a heartbeat later, and crimson shame chased away the interest.

"I—" Rahelu dropped her gaze to the bare rock before she managed to swallow her shame and force the words out, "—I don't know if I'll be much help. I've failed the Guild's Elementary level examinations for Augury four times."

"Do not fret, nela," Onneja said. "You need to do nothing else, other than to be as you are. I only require you to be a focus."

Rahelu looked up so fast that her vision blurred for a moment. "Could you..." the words she wanted to use was '*foretell my future*', but she knew better than that so instead she asked, "would I see the Augury too?"

"No," Onneja said, then smiled at the regret that tinged Rahelu's aura. "I look not into your future, but the future of Ennuost Yrg."

What?

Rahelu was no expert (on account of having failed the Elementary Augury examinations so many times) but she had never heard of any Guild-trained Augur performing an Augury on a place using a person as a focus.

"Relax," Onneja said as she closed her eyes again to sink into a meditative trance, "and simply *be*."

Rahelu breathed in the tang of the sea air and felt the cool, rough texture of the granite boulder through her thin cotton trousers. Closing her eyes, she tried to calm the thudding of her heart, the rasping of her breath, still the trembling of her limbs and just *listen*.

She heard the crashing of breakers upon the shore, their ponderous drumming against the sea cliffs slowly easing the anxious rhythm of her heart. Somewhere, high above and to the right, were the eager-shrieks of two mated gulls hunting, as they wheeled and circled in the warm updraft. Further to the right, hidden just below the cliff top, were the softer hunger-chirps of their nestlings.

To her left was a deep pool of placid calm, still like stone and as fathomless as the middle of Elumaje. Onneja's resonance aura was all relaxed control; a uniform shade of cool, grey-blue without even the slightest ebb and flow.

Beside her, Rahelu's own aura was a tangled, swirling, jagged, pulsating mess of garbled colors that shifted as she wrestled with her aura and her thoughts.

What if no House accepted her? Would she be stuck, Petitioning the Houses year after year, hawking fish to stay ahead of Isonn's moneylenders? How long would it take to scrape together enough coin to pay off their fishing sloop? A decade? Two? Would her family ever be able to leave the Lowdocks?

Each flickering yellow-green spike of anxiety sprouted another, all of them wriggling like eels in her mental grasp.

Rahelu tried to reassert control, tried to force back every other emotion rampaging through her resonance aura with calm reason, clinging to cold logic by running through the calculations for multiple scenarios in her head. She adjusted her estimations of the most likely payoff for the level of risk inherent in each one and then weighed the scenarios against each other.

With her Guild training completed, Rahelu could join her mother at the market for a full day, every day, instead of the two spans after dawn and the two spans before sunset. Or she could join her father every day on the sea. The payoff of a bigger catch (assuming consistent fish populations throughout the year for simplicity) would have to be offset against the capricious whims of the Stormbringer and the possibility that a bigger catch would not translate into more profits—good as her mother was, she only managed to sell out of fish three days a week (and then what would they do with all the leftover fish?) and twice a month, no matter her mother's precautions as she headed home in the dusk, one gang or another would relieve her of the day's takings on one pretext or another.

Her mother used to fight back (or run, if she couldn't fight) in those very first days in Ennuost Yrg.

She didn't do that anymore.

The Evocation unspooled without conscious intent from Rahelu:

*It is her thirteenth birthday and her parents have both promised to return early, with goldtrout and bream, to prepare a rare meal in celebration.*

*She limps home, suppressing tears and favoring a twisted ankle after being bested in yet another spar by some House-born trainee, and sits on their dirt floor, waiting for her parents to come home to the drumbeat of thunder, refraining from lighting their fish oil lamp even as the dim light of the winter sun fades into night because soon—soon!—her parents will be home and then they will light the fire for cooking, so there would be no need to use up the precious fish oil that she might need the next time she did not manage to finish her Guild assignments during the day.*

*She waits and waits and waits until the moon rises and silvers the streets before she hobbles outside only to discover her mother bruised and bleeding, collapsed a hundred strides from their door, unable to crawl any further.*

*They do not make it to the market the next day. They barely make it down the treacherous stairs to the twelfth berth by the fourth pier, to stare out at the horizon and wait for her father's sloop to return. It is sundown by the time they see his torn sail and dark by time Rahelu can scramble from the pier to the sloop, to help Bzel unhitch the sloop from Hzin's larger boat and tie it up.*

*Her father is inside, feverish and shivering, and she is only thirteen and not strong enough to carry him up the long, twisting stair while supporting her mother so she helps her mother into the sloop, pulls down the torn sail and the two of them curl up around her father's shivering body underneath the waxed canvas that night and—*

Rahelu wrenched her mind back from the past and scrubbed furiously at her eyes, feeling black threads of despair webbing their way through her resonance aura, twining around the yellow lightning. She forced her eyes open, wet eyelashes sticking together as she blinked away the traces of her aura and allowed her eyes to adjust back to the bright morning light.

Meditating wasn't going to help her family. Weighing up her other options wasn't going to help either—whether she chose the sea or the market stall was irrelevant because at best it would amount to treading water.

No. The only real way to get out of the Lowdocks and to be free of their debts was if Rahelu joined a House. Nobody would dare touch her family, if she were a Petitioner of even a Minor House. And a Supplicant's wages for a season would be enough to pay off their debts.

She cast a glance at Onneja, whose chest still rose and fell in time with the waves, deep in her Augury.

How much longer would Onneja take? The Conclave journeymage had said she would need to leave in a span or two. Rahelu fretted as she tried to judge where the sun was in its stately climb into the sky by the warmth of its rays on her face and guessed it might be close to high sun by the time she made it to the Guild. How bad would the Petition queue be then?

"Onneja?" she ventured tentatively.

The only response she got was from the gull nestlings, shrieking in hunger as their parents returned from the sea.

She tried to go back to meditation, tried to refocus on the feel of the wind, the song of the waves, tried to remain seated, cross-legged and still, up there atop the boulder at the highest, easternmost point of Ennuost Yrg.

She failed miserably.

"Onneja?" she asked again.

Still nothing.

Rahelu gingerly stretched out her resonance senses, afraid to do anything that might break the Conclave journeymage's concentration (as if she hadn't tried to do that twice already by speaking).

Onneja's aura remained a perfect grey-blue mirror, smooth and unbroken.

Time to do something more productive. Rahelu steeled her resolve and mentally rehearsed her request: *Onneja, I beg your forgiveness in advance. Today is Petition Day and though I have tried, I have not been able to secure a sponsor from the Houses. I owe you more than I can ever repay in this lifetime and should not ask another favor of you, but I have no one else to turn to. Please, for my parents' sake, sponsor my Petition. It would mean everything. It would—*

Pale grey shivered through the Conclave journeymage's resonance aura and her eyes flew open. Onneja leapt up with a spry motion that would have been more natural on a woman half her age.

"Onneja?" Rahelu asked for the third time as she scrambled to follow the Conclave journeymage, who descended down the side of the boulder with the swift surety of a mountain goat. "What—"

Rahelu's sandals slipped and she slid down the rest of the irregular steps cut into the rock to land at the bottom in an ungraceful heap.

Onneja was already three quarters of the way to the other side of the plateau. She said, "It is worse than I thought," but explained no further.

"Onneja, wait!"

The Conclave journeymage disappeared from view, down the Eastcliffs, even as Rahelu picked herself up.

*I am sorry but I must go, Onneja sent. I know not if we shall meet again. Have courage, nela, in the dark times ahead.*

No!

Rahelu reached out with her resonance senses, but she could find no traces of Onneja's resonance signature, even though the Conclave journeymage could not have run so fast that she would be outside the range of Rahelu's Seeking.

That was it then. There would be no help from Onneja.

Ignoring the scrapes on her right side, Rahelu kept running anyway, cursing as she had to slow down to make out the twisting steps through blurry eyes.

She had already been late, when she ought to have been early, and she would arrive even later now, thanks to her poor decision-making. It would be a small miracle if she managed to reach the Guild before the queue for Petitions extended past the gates.