

CHAPTER 3

Thomas set down the handles of the wheelbarrow and wearily wiped his sleeve across his face. Scooping and shoveling five month's worth of wet dung had proved harder than he'd expected. He waved futilely at the flies. They seemed to prefer his head to the now empty barrow. The composting pits had buzzed with great swarms of them, fired up by the spring sunlight. His own private cloud had followed him back, landing on his ears and nose and hair, crawling around happily in his sweat. He swatted and missed again.

The meal had been a disappointment. Aunt Singer was still working when Thomas came in from his talk with Uncle Piper. Linen was a town specialty, and Aunt Singer was one of many weavers who supplied the river merchants with cloth. She was supposed to deliver six bolts of white linen to the wharf that evening, to be shipped downriver to the dyers, and was hard pressed to finish the order. She glanced at his spoon, thanked him with a vague remark about "how interesting" it looked, then went right back to weaving.

Grandmother Weaver, too lame in the hands to work more than an hour a day, had managed to throw together a meal, but the meat was cold and the bread was burned and the cabbage was old enough to be half pickled in its own juice. Thomas grabbed a chunk of bread and a quick mouthful of meat, then went right to the shed to get the barrow and shovel. He

attacked the privy with a fury that sustained him all the way to the pits and as far back as the road.

Now, faced with the imminent return to the paint shop, he succumbed to resentment and slouched against the barrow, letting his eyes follow the rutted lane as it wandered down the riverbank, away from Wanting Town. His parents had gone that way ten years ago, following his mother's vision. Her sudden show of talent as a seer. He couldn't remember it really – he'd only been three at the time – just that suddenly she had changed, and then she had gone downriver. Along with his father. He could hardly remember their faces; they were just two silhouettes that sometimes walked through his thoughts. Walked in and away, shrinking with distance and time. Following some mage who was supposed to train her new-found talent, leaving him stuck here with Uncle Piper, who thought Thomas's future was to be a painter.

Thomas slapped at the handles of the barrow. He'd given up wishing his parents would return. Now, when he let himself think about it, he was glad they were gone. Having the great Thomas Painter here to watch his son try to paint – that would be far worse than Uncle Piper's bull-headed nagging. Only he wished his father's reputation had disappeared with them. Leaving him free to get out of the paint shop. He had his knife; he could carve for his living – trade spoons for food, even barter passage on one of the flatboats heading downstream.

But no. No one wanted spoons carved like fishes. He'd have to carve something else, something better. He slipped his hand into his belt pouch and touched the small nut-sized elm burl there. He ran his finger over the half-carved shape, a sleeping cat. It would be a gift for Dulci on her birthday, an amulet to bring luck. People would pay for work like that. And for useful things like candle sticks, decorated boxes, quaichs and festival bowls. And chair backs, door panels, beam ends to cap the joinery of new homes. And he would carve figurines, large versions of the little amulet, animals of all kinds. Full-sized statues even, so perfect they'd look alive. Mayors. The Barons. The Duke himself. All he had to do was start walking downriver.

No, he thought again. That's what my father did; walked away and left everything behind. Everything undone. I'm not like that. I owe Singer and Piper more than that.

Still, the path drew his eyes. Thomas tore his thoughts from his father and his duty, let them wander back to all the wonderful things he would carve. He stared dreamily at nothing while flies buzzed unnoticed around him. Unconsciously, his hand moved from the pouch to caress the handle of his knife.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a falling branch grazed his head. It bounced lightly on his shoulder and slid down the front of his shirt. Without thinking, he caught it. Then a harsh croak from right above startled him even more. He flinched as a huge raven swooped past his face. Feathers brushed his cheek. Talons grabbed at his hands.

With a cry, Thomas threw himself back and struck at the bird. Croaking harshly, it soared off. He watched it, wondering what could have made it act so strangely. It seemed angry. Its croaks sounded almost like curses.

Suddenly, it swooped on him again, stabbing at his face with its sharp black beak.

“Hey!” Thomas yelled. “Get away, you blasted bird!” The anger and frustration he’d been hoarding broke loose. He whipped it with the branch.

A puff of mist burst from the leaves on the branch, but Thomas didn’t notice. He flailed again, striking the raven’s wing this time as it flapped heavily around his head, grabbing and pecking. He flailed again and again, and each time more mist sprang from the branch, until both he and the bird were enveloped in a thin damp fog. He swung blindly, carving a swath through the fog and landing a solid blow on the raven’s head. It squawked and flew off, trailing mist as it clawed its way up out of reach.

Thomas waved the wand in a parting threat, slicing off blocks of cloud. Only then did he notice what was happening. He stared at the blocks of cloud, drifting away now on a growing breeze. He stared in amazement at the white wisps still leaking from the branch. He waved his free hand through the dissipating fog, feeling the dampness as it swirled around his fingers.

He studied the branch. It appeared to be just that, a branch torn from a tree. Though now that he looked closely, he could see that the leaves it bore were odd, shaped like tears almost, and so fresh they seemed to pulse with green. The scar on the end was fresh too, yet the bark where

he held it was worn by long handling, smooth and silver, while the rest of the branch was gray and rough and very much alive.

Wondering, he looked back up, searching the sky for the raven. It was soaring high above him now, and there was a small flock of crows nearby, milling nervously. Upstream, dark clouds were blowing over the lip of the high reach on a strengthening wind, converging toward the birds. The raven soared off downstream as if in retreat, followed by the crows.

Thomas watched, puzzled – the raven, the crows, the clouds. The branch. He looked at it again. He gave it a little shake. The leaves fluttered and emitted a tiny bit of mist. He waved the branch. Again, just a tiny mist from the leaves. But the wind was suddenly stronger, and the dark clouds drew together to a single towering thunderhead that shadowed the sun.

Thomas studied the cloud, then the branch. Hesitantly, feeling a little foolish, he lifted the branch and waved it at the cloud. Puffy bits swirled out from the cloud's leading edge. Thomas's mouth was suddenly very dry. He swallowed and lifted the branch again. This time, he made a single slash through the air. A line drew through the cloud, splitting it cleanly.

Thomas studied what he had done. Then he slashed again, and another line drew through the cloud, another piece split off. He swung the branch in wide arcs, drawing curves and loops in the cloud. He sliced off pieces and shaped them into circles. He stretched one into an oval. Then he added a tail. Then eyes. Then fins, and suddenly he had a fish – a fish that looked a little like a spoon, but still a fish.

Grinning, Thomas made another fish, and then a tiny school of cloud fish that seemed to wriggle in the currents of the air. He shaped a bird from the darkest part of the cloud. It made him think of the raven, but he couldn't see it anywhere, so he went back to making birds and then sheep, and now a face with an open mouth and clouds of laughter.

Thomas stopped then. He lowered his arm, realizing how tired it suddenly felt. It was even shaking a little. He rubbed it and took a deep breath, watching the sky as the clouds slowly tried to unshape themselves. His mind felt a bit like that.

Then someone coughed.

Thomas turned. To his astonishment – and dismay – a crowd of people stood in the lane to the town. Staring at him. Staring at the shifting clouds too, but mostly at him. And the look in their eyes chilled him. It wasn't a look of anger or fear; it was a look of awe. It made Thomas feel very exposed and uncomfortable. Embarrassed even. It was a look that expected something of him.

The person who had coughed was none other than the mayor, looking flushed and somehow satisfied. Beside him, sharp and lean in his dark red tunic with the bull-and-knife emblem, stood the baronsman. And then Thomas saw Ruel Baker and Silas Joynter and Carla Miller; it seemed as if half the town had come to watch him. His heart sank; Uncle Piper was there too. But even he looked awed instead of angry. In fact, he was smiling.

Uncle Piper pushed forward through the crowd, his smile growing as he came. He was absolutely beaming as he lumbered out past the mayor and came to stand in front of Thomas.

“You see, boy,” he said gruffly, “I told you it'd come.”

“Sir?” Thomas stammered, feeling totally confused.

“Your talent, Thomas,” Uncle Piper explained. He waved up at the sky. “I told you you were a painter, eh?”

Thomas was dumbfounded. He tried to protest; it hadn't been painting. Uncle Piper just shook his head, and behind him the crowd agreed. Thomas caught snatches from the blurred mutter of their awed voices. “Painter...fantastic...magic...like his father...”

“But you know I can't paint,” Thomas finally managed.

“Nonsense,” Uncle Piper growled happily. “You're a Painter, aren't you? You just didn't have the right brush.”

“Speaking of which,” the baronsman said, stepping forward. “Where did you get that?” He pointed his sharp chin at the branch, as if he didn't quite dare put his hand too near.

Thomas looked at the branch, which still seemed to pulse with life in his hand. “I don't know,” he said. “I mean, it fell on me. I was standing here...” He was suddenly aware of the wheelbarrow, and the flies.

But the crowd didn't notice. They muttered again, nodding sagely. "From the sky...laid on him...magic all right...destiny..."

"I guess it's a wand," Thomas said. He held it out, hoping someone would take it. They all edged back.

"Well, obviously in your hands, it's a wand," said the mayor with a large smile. "And more important than its source would be its function. I wonder, and I imagine everyone here is wondering, for it's a question that certainly would come to the mind of a thinking man in these dry days..." he paused importantly, speaking more to the townspeople than to Thomas... "I wonder if it can make rain."

Again there were nods and muttering from the crowd, and Thomas knew why: the drought. Every time it clouded over, people watched the sky hopefully, but the clouds always passed by in the distance. There had even been talk of hiring a weather mage, but people were suspicious of mages. Besides, the cost for such service was steep.

Now the mayor smiled at Thomas with a great many teeth. The crowd took on a new look. Their awe became need; expectation became a demand.

"How about it, lad?" the mayor urged as Thomas hesitated. "Do you think you can paint us a rainstorm?"

"I...I don't know," Thomas said, trying to avoid everyone's eyes. "I've never done this before."

"Don't worry, Thomas," Uncle Piper said, "you've got the talent, eh?"

"Perhaps this will help inspire you," the baronsman said. He held up a gold coin and Thomas's breath skipped. It was a talent, stamped with the Duke's profile, new and polished and bright in the returning sun. And worth a full month's work by a journeyman. "Make it rain and this is yours," the baronsman promised.

"Well," said the mayor, "there's the charm, eh? Honest pay for honest work. And a very kind offer from our Baron, as I think all would agree." Again he turned a bit to address the crowd behind him. "Friends," he spoke, "fellow citizens, what do we say? Shall he try it?"

A great mutter of ayes came in response.

“Well, then, it’s unanimous,” the mayor said happily. “Go to it, lad.”

“Remember,” Uncle Piper encouraged, “it’s just like painting.”

If that’s what it is, Thomas thought, it’s going to be a very dry year.

But he didn’t dare say that with everyone looking at him so hopefully. Swallowing hard to clear the lump from his chest, he turned from the staring faces and looked up. The clouds were all drifting away, shrinking as they went. The afternoon sun shone clearly in the growing expanse of empty, blue sky. Thomas looked at the branch, wondering how he had ever made it work. His hand was clenched so tightly around the bark that his knuckles were white. He swallowed hard.

Right, he thought. We all need this.

Steeling himself, he held up the wand and moved it. The clouds seemed to pause.

Heartened, Thomas moved the wand more briskly. He reached out with it, trying to herd the clouds back. Amazed, he saw them stop, even swell a little. He swung the wand again, trying to remember how he had slashed at the raven. With horror, he saw the clouds split in two as he sliced through the air. He heard muttering behind him.

Moving the wand more gently, he managed to coax the clouds back together. Then he stroked them toward him, as though he were brushing paint across a canvas. Hesitantly, the clouds came. Bits and swirls kept leaking off the edges and he fought to hold them together. Almost in spite of what Thomas did, they formed into one mass and drifted slowly overhead. He began to feel a little hope. He had stopped trying to paint, had stopped moving the wand at all, just held it up in his outstretched hand. The clouds came of their own accord, as though drawn to a beacon. They thickened and darkened. The wind increased, dry at first, but then damp and heavy. Mist leaked from the wand. Droplets formed on the tear-shaped leaves and dripped on Thomas’s hand. The cloud billowed, looming suddenly into a dark anvil-headed tower.

There was more muttering behind Thomas, but now it had a tinge of fear. Thomas felt it too; a sense of dread at the power made real by that pile of dark cloud. The air seemed to thicken. The wand tingled uncomfortably in his palm.

Then streaks of mist shredded from the cloud and started to fall toward the ground. The crowd gasped. Even Uncle Piper muttered a gruff curse of surprise. Thomas felt his heart soar. He clenched his hand and thrust the wand as high as he could reach.

Pain burst in his palm, as though the wand was covered with a thousand pins. A hot wind whipped his face. The cloud pulsed, swirled, and fountained upward, sucking the mist back into its guts. Thomas's hair stood on end. With a sizzle and crack that stung his ears, lightning jabbed down from the cloud and struck the ground at the edge of the river, not ten paces away. The light blinded him. Instantly, a booming roar of thunder deafened him. The ground shook. Thomas fell to his knees, fists pressed to his ears, eyes squeezed shut in pain.

Just as suddenly, the sharp pain in his hand ceased, replaced by a dull, burned feeling. The hollow in his ears filled with ringing. More slowly, the bright blindness began to fade. He became aware of hands on his shoulders, a voice mumbling, tinny and scared beneath the shrill ringing in his ears. Blinking tears from his eyes, Thomas could just make out Uncle Piper's face, close to his own, eyes wide with fear and concern. Thomas wiped his eyes with his left hand and nodded, trying to show he was all right. He struggled to his feet, with Uncle Piper's big hands on his shoulders doing most of the work. He stared through the fading dimness. The mayor and the baronsman were dark shapes, one blocky, one gaunt. The rest of the crowd was a blur.

Uncle Piper said something, then had to shout when Thomas shook his head dumbly. "Best put that down," he yelled, and Thomas realized he was still clutching the wand, arm stiff now, holding it out from his body as if it could bite. Quickly, but carefully, he brought his hand down to his side. He would have thrown the wand to the ground, but was afraid of what might happen.

"Well," the mayor said, then shook his head and spoke more loudly. "Well, it's obvious the lad has power."

“I’m not sure I’d call it talent, though,” the baronsman said sourly, pocketing his coin.

The mayor was of stouter stuff. “Of course he does,” he insisted smoothly. “How else could he make the wand work at all, eh? Eh, friends? Now is not the time to give up, to relinquish the possibilities, the great potential inherent in this lad, our young friend here, young, uh, Painter, and his marvelous and powerful wand. We’ll have our rain yet, fear not!”

There was a general mutter of approval and one or two people even gave a weak cheer.

“And how do you plan to do that?” said the baronsman. “He needs a master to teach him.”

“How about that weather mage upstream?” Silas Joynter put in. “Nuatta. Maybe she could train the boy.”

“Well, well, let’s not be hasty,” the mayor said, rushing over their words. “There would be some cost. Considerable cost. These mages, you know, they can be a greedy lot, my friends. And haste burns talent. Now is the time to come together to consider alternatives that suit all—.”

“Zarah,” someone shouted deeper in the crowd. “Ask Zarah.”

“Aye, Zarah,” another agreed, and other voices chimed in.

“Certainly, splendid idea,” said the mayor stiffly. “I couldn’t agree more. With Zarah’s advice, and some careful consultation among ourselves, and with the reasoned advice of the baronsman here, I’m sure we can find the best path for young Painter, a path to bring out the strength and talent that will lead to a bright, rainy future for both him and our town. To Zarah!”

Clapping his hand on the baronsman’s shoulder to draw him along, the mayor strode back through the crowd toward the town. It closed behind him, an excited swirl of chattering people. Thomas marched stiffly in their midst. He felt numb from the eyes down, unable to fight the pull of his neighbors. The wand still stung his hand. He held it carefully before him so it couldn’t so much as twitch. Despite that, faint mist still trailed from its tear-shaped leaves. Right now, the thought of training to be a mage filled him with dread. All he wanted was to go someplace quiet, with a block of wood and his knife. But no one asked what he wanted.