

*Chapter One*

*Safe Harbor*

DYING—even for just a little while—took a lot out of a person. Alec and his companions had arrived in Gedre last night and Alec had managed to stay on his horse as they rode up from the harbor to the clan house, but he'd spoiled it by fainting in the courtyard. Mydri had taken one sharp look at him and packed him off to bed in a room overlooking the harbor. And when their host saw Sebrahn, Riagil í Molan had ordered that the *rhekaro* stay hidden, too. Given Sebrahn's strange appearance, Alec could hardly blame him.

Winter rain lashed against the window across the room and the wind moaned in the chimney. Gedre harbor was barely visible, the ships anchored there just dark smudges in the mist. After their stormy crossing from Plenimar, it was rather nice to be in a soft bed that didn't roll under him. He had no idea what time it was. When he'd awakened, Seregil was already gone, no doubt to speak with his sisters or their host, the *kbirnari*.

Sebrahn was curled up on the cushions of the window seat, gazing out—though at what it was impossible to say. The *rhekaro* might have Alec's childhood features, but it was impossible to pass him off as an ordinary child. His pale, silver-white hair hung nearly to the floor behind him. His white skin looked ghostly in the grey light, and his silver eyes were the color of steel. Riagil's wife, Yhali, had replaced the rags Sebrahn had arrived in with soft Aurënfaie tunics, knitted stockings, and shoes that fit him, though Sebrahn seemed confused by the latter and kept taking them off. Just as any little child might do

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*But he's not a child, is he?*

Pushing that thought away, Alec reached for the mug Mydri had left on the bedside table and sipped the medicinal broth. His hand shook a bit, spilling a few drops down the front of his nightshirt.

He and Seregil had been in desperate condition when Micum and Thero had found them in Plenimar, but Sebrahn had been even worse. He was made of magic and had used a staggering amount to kill their pursuers in the Plenimaran wilderness, bring Alec back from Bilairy's gate, and heal both Seregil and Alec. For the first few days of the voyage they feared that the wizened, depleted little *rhekaro* might have used himself up. Too weak to get out of his bunk, Alec had fed Sebrahn several times a day, squeezing blood from his fingertip onto the *rhekaro*'s little grey tongue. After a few days of this Sebrahn grew more alert and continued to improve. And today he seemed nearly himself again.

Alec wondered how long Riagil and Mydri were going to keep him shut away up here. His long linen nightshirt was fresh, but he hadn't had a proper bath since they'd escaped from the alchemist's villa almost two weeks ago. He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair,

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which hung halfway down his back—lank and dirty. His fingers caught in snarls and tangles. Stretching out one long blond strand, he wondered—not for the first time—whether he should just cut it off, as Seregil had sacrificed his during their escape. Sebrahn was squirming around now. One by one, the borrowed shoes fell to the floor. The alchemist, Charis Yhakobin, had created the rhekaro to be nothing more than a sexless, voiceless tool—one whose unnatural flesh and strange white blood could, according to Yhakobin, be distilled for some kind of potent elixir. But Sebrahn and his illfated predecessor had been much more than that. Sebrahn might be sexless, but he was not voiceless, or mindless, either.

“What do you see?” asked Alec.

Sebrahn turned to look at him. “Ahek.”

Alec chuckled. His name had been Sebrahn’s first halting word. Since then, he’d managed a few more for people, things, and a few actions. Understanding was another matter. Strangely, it didn’t seem to matter whether you spoke Skalan, ’faie, or Plenimaran to him. Tell him *cup*, *tyxa*, or *kupa*, and if there was one in the room, he would fetch it. Sebrahn left the window seat and joined Alec on the bed, leaning against his side. Alec touched the rhekaro’s soft, cool little hand, noting the thin scars that ringed the base of several fingers where they’d grown back after Yhakobin cut them off for some experiment.

*Why didn't you sing to save yourself?*

Alec gathered him close again, his heart beating a little faster. “No one is going to hurt you again, or take you away. If they try, we’ll leave.”

Sebrahn looked around the room, then pointed out the window and said in his raspy little voice, “Leeeve.”

“That’s right. On a ship. Can you say ‘ship?’”

Sebrahn was not interested.

“Chamber pot.”

The rhekaro slipped off the bed and pulled the required vessel from under the bed. Alec made use of it and had Sebrahn put it back for the skutter to deal with. Now what? There didn’t appear to be anything he could do but watch the rain. It was a relief when he heard someone coming up the stairs to his door.

Micum looked in and grinned. “That’s a long face!”

“Where is everybody?”

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Micum came in and pulled a chair up beside the bed. “At breakfast. I came up to see if you’re awake. Hungry?”

“Not really.”

Micum held out his hands, and Sebrahn abandoned Alec for the big man’s lap.

“Traitor,” Alec grumbled. Sebrahn had warmed to their tall, red-haired friend during the voyage. Sebrahn reached up to touch Micum’s thick, grey-streaked moustache, apparently puzzled that the big man had something on his face that his two beardless protectors didn’t.

“Uncle Micum,” Alec said with a smile.

Micum laughed and kissed Sebrahn’s hand, just as if he were one of his own brood. “I like the sound of that. What do you say, little sprout?”

Sebrahn didn’t say anything, just leaned against Micum’s broad chest and fixed his gaze on Alec. It was too easy to imagine anything he wanted in those eyes. What Sebrahn was really feeling—or if he could—remained a mystery. Alec and Micum were in the midst of a game of cards when Seregil came in with the wizards. Magyana looked most of her two centuries today; under a fringe of grey bangs, her lined face was pale and tired, but her eyes were kind as always. Thero, still in the youth of his first century, was tall and dark, with a thin beard and dark curling hair pulled back from a long, somewhat austere face. But his pale green eyes were warm, too, as he took in the sight of Alec and Sebrahn.

“We need to talk,” Seregil said, sitting down on the bed beside Alec.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Micum said, putting Sebrahn on the bed and rising to go.

“Please, stay,” said Thero. “We have no secrets from you in this matter.”

This sounded serious, and all the more so when Magyana threw the latch and cast a warding on the room to keep out prying ears.

“Now then, this creature—” she began, her lined face somber.

“Please don’t call him that,” said Alec. “He’s a person and he has a name.”

“He is not a person, my dear,” Magyana told him gently.

“You may be right about the rest of it, but he’s not human, or ’faie, either.”

“There’s something we need to tell you,” said Thero.

“What is it?”

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“Thero sensed it, but not clearly, when he first saw Sebrahn in Plenimar,” Magyana explained. “It’s true that the rhekaro has been given the semblance of a child, but another form radiates beyond the physical. I don’t understand it, but what I see around him is the form of a young dragon.”

Alec stared hard at Sebrahn, squinting his eyes, but saw nothing unusual. “A dragon? That’s impossible! Sebrahn was made from bits of—me!” Seregil was frowning at the younger wizard. “Why didn’t you tell us, Thero?”

“I wasn’t sure what I was sensing. It’s Magyana who sees it clearly.”

Magyana took Alec’s hand in hers. “Seregil has told me something of how Sebrahn was made. I believe you can tell me more. Do you know what materials he used?” Alec shifted uneasily; it was a time he didn’t really want to remember. “Sulfur and salt, tinctures—”

“Nothing of dragons?”

“I saw dried fingerling dragons hanging in his workshop, but I didn’t see him put any in.”

“Very well. What else do you remember?”

“There was something he called the ‘water of life’—some kind of silver, I think.”

“Quicksilver?” asked Magyana.

“Yes, that was it. He put that all in with my tears, blood, shit and piss, hair, and ...