

# THE STONECASTER'S STORY

THE DESIRE TO KNOW the future gnaws at our bones. That is where it started, and might have ended, years ago.

I had cast the stones, seeing their faces flick over and fall: Death, Love, Murder, Treachery, Hope. We are a treacherous people – half of our stones show betrayal and violence and death from those close, death from those far away. It is not so with other peoples. I have seen other sets of stones that show only natural disasters: death from sickness, from age, the pain of a broken heart, loss in childbirth. And those stones are more than half full with pleasure and joy and plain, solid warnings like ‘You reap what you sow’ and ‘Victory is not the same as satisfaction’.

Of course, we live in a land taken by force, by battle and murder and invasion. It is not so surprising, perhaps, that our stones reflect our history.

So. I cast the stones again, wondering. How much of our future do we call to ourselves through this scrying? How much of it do we make happen because the stones give us a pattern to fulfil?

I have seen the stones cast too many times to doubt them. When I see Murder in the stones, I know someone will die. But would they have died without my foretelling? Perhaps merely saying the word, even in a whisper, brings the thought to the surface of a mind, allows the mind to shape it, give it substance, when otherwise it might have remained nothing more than vague murmurings, easily ignored.

Death recurred again and again in my castings that night. I did not ask whose. Perhaps it was mine, perhaps not. I had no one left to lose, and therefore did not fear to lose myself.

## B L O O D T I E S

There was someone at the door, breathing heavily outside, afraid to come in. But he did, as they always do, driven by love or fear or greed or pain, or simple curiosity, a desire to giggle with friends.

This one came in shyly: young, eighteen or nineteen, brown hair, green trousers and blue boots. He squatted across the cloth from me with the ease of near-childhood. I held out my left hand, searching his face. He had hazel eyes, but the shape of his face showed he had old blood, from the people who lived in this land before the landtaken, the invasion. There was old pain, too, old anger stoked up high.

He knew what to do. He spat in his own palm, a palm criss-crossed by scars, as though it had been cut many times, and clapped it to mine. I held him tightly and reached for the pouch with my right hand. He was strong enough to stay silent as I dug in the pouch for five stones and threw them across the cloth between us. He was even strong enough not to follow their fall with his eyes, to hold my gaze until I nodded at him and looked down.

He saw it in my face.

‘Bad?’

I nodded. One by one I touched the stones lying face-up. ‘Death. Bereavement. Chaos. This is the surface. This is what all will see.’ Delicately I turned the other two stones over. ‘Revenge and Rejoicing. This is what is hidden.’ An odd mixture, one I had never before seen.

He brooded over them, not asking anything more. The stones did not speak to me as they often do; all I could tell him were their names. It seemed to be enough for him.

‘You know what this refers to?’ I asked.

He nodded, absently, staring at Rejoicing. He let go of my hand and slid smoothly to his feet, then tugged some coins out of a pocket and let them fall on the rug.

‘My thanks, stonecaster.’ Then he was gone.

Who was I to set Death on the march? I know my stones by their feel, even in the darkness of the pouch. I could have fumbled and selected him a happy dream: Love Requited, Troubles Over, Patience. I could have soothed the anger in his eyes, the pain in his heart.

But who am I to cheat the stones?

After he left, I cast them again. This time, Death did not appear. She had gone out the door with the young one and his scars.