

# **JOURNEY OF THE SACRED KING**

## **Book I**

### **MY SISTER'S KEEPER**

By

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In memory of Gertrude Lois Simms.

"[S]he loved not wisely, but too well."

Shakespeare, Othello

Once there were three brothers, Brandrahoon the vampire, Isranon called the Dawnhand, speaker to spirits, and Waejonan the Accursed, first of sa'necari. Isranon defied his brothers and was destroyed, his descendants forced into the darkness. In those days there rose up three women, Asharen, Danae, and Rowan. They built Shaurone to hold back the brothers' darkness. And then there was Abelard who will be born again into his own lineage to ride once more beneath Rowan's banner. Mage-paladin to the God Kalirion the Lord of Light, healing and prophecy, Abelard's return will signal a godwar. Should he fail or perish, then only the Children of the Risen Dead will stand between the Fathers of Darkness and the destruction of the world.

St. Tarmus of Lorendon

Priest of Willodarus, God of the Woodlands and Wild Creatures.

## PROLOGUE

Margrenan Lahktormi brye Rowan, called Margren, younger daughter of the Mar'ajan of Rowanslea, stirred uneasily in her sleep wrapped in coverlets of crimson silk in the depths of her curtained bed. She had slept late into the morning without resting, troubled by a dream that wound again and again through her sleep like an unending echo. Several times in the night she had risen to pace about the room, trying various ways to be freed of it before trying again in vain for true rest. Now a shaft of sunlight lanced between the crimson draperies to graze her dark-skinned oval face, the heavy curling masses of her black hair that fanned across her pillows, and laid a golden glimmering on the long, thick lashes of her large eyes.

She dreamed of her sister again. Margren teetered on the edges of a yawning abyss built of loneliness gaping at her feet like the hungry maw of some incomprehensible demonic beast, waiting to swallow her whole, to crush her fragile security in its teeth and suffocate her feelings of acceptance within the ranks of the Sharani nobility as it sucked her down its throat. She could feel the cold stone beneath her feet, see its gray-black outline, but she knew what it was – it existed both within her and without her, and it mattered not at all whether her body or her psyche fell into it. The result would be the same. She felt abandoned, unwanted, alone, and very lost.

"Step in. Step in," Her sister's voice at her elbow coaxed her toward it. "It's where you belong, isn't it? No one wants you, Margren. No one at all."

Margren turned to protest, her eyes met the dark gray, confident eyes of her sister, and she winced away, causing her foot to miss its step. She fell screaming, "No!" only to wake with a start in her bed, clutching the silken sheets tightly enough for the blood to retreat from her knuckles.

She lay shaking for a long time. Margren used to try and tell people why and how her sister hurt her so, but no one seemed to care. Then, when she would get upset and start crying, they would write her off as overly emotional and tell her to not be so sensitive. She hated that. It put her on the defensive. There was a difference between having passionate feelings and being excessively hysterical. The former was strength, while the latter was weakness. But she had never been able to convince anyone that she was the former. The nobles and retainers at her ma'aram's court kept telling her that she got carried away and did not really see clearly. One day she would fix them all and then they would wish that they had seen clearly!

Her big bed was wedged tightly into a corner, one side and the head pressed solidly against the stone walls, trapping the heavy curtains on those sides. It felt secure and sheltered, like a stolid soldier who could not be moved. The heavy, hard-rock maple bed had required six people to get it into her room.

Magical energies prickled at the edges of Margren's awareness, slowly and insistently drawing her attention from the grip of her dream. She rolled over, pushing herself up on her elbows to gaze expectantly at the head of her bed. When the bed had been placed there, there had been nothing but a solid wall at the head. Margren's lover had changed that. He was the most powerful mage in the Sharani Empire, though no one even knew he was in the realm. The curtains parted as two slender, long-fingered hands slipped through, pushing them further and further apart, revealing the hidden enchantary gate connecting Margren's bedroom to an arcane fortress concealed beneath the ground on a distant bluff crowned by ancient ruins.

"Mephistis?" Margren sat up, crossed her legs, and made more room for the almost gaunt, young man to emerge at her side. She opened her arms, reaching to draw him into them as she did on their frequent trysting only to draw back again at the grim expression in his eyes.

"Ladonys has sent for your sister," Mephistis whispered softly into her ear.

Margren's large, doe-like eyes widened, "No! She mustn't come back! She mustn't. I'd... I'd shrivel up and die if she came back..."

"She's sent the one person your sister can't refuse: Brendorn," his voice was soft with a very slight lilt, so unlike the Sharani, Margren's race, seductive even in its seriousness.

Margren sucked in a deep breath, steadying herself, her eyes going suddenly hard as black ice. "Then our agent will have to get there first."

"I've also sent people to stop Brendorn from reaching her."

"Good. What can a silly flower tender do?" she said, anger edging her voice now. "Even if he is her lovemate... a gardener."

"Don't underestimate him, my love. He may not know how to fight, but he is sylvan. His woodcraft is great."

Margren turned away from Mephistis, folding her arms across her stomach. "First you tell me not to worry, now you tell me to worry."

"Not at all. Just to be very careful." Mephistis wrapped his comforting arms around her, his black goatee tickling her neck as he pressed his face into the back of her cheek. "Besides, the Blade of Nine Souls is nearly done. Not even a paladin of Aroana can fight that."

"Ha'taren," Margren said, supplying the Sharani word for the paladins of the God Aroana. "She got everything I ever wanted handed to her on a platter as if she'd earned it. But she's not ha'taren any longer. She's wallowing in the filthy gutters of Vorgensburg with the rest of the pigs she attracts. Now her filthy lifemates, Ladonys

and Brendorn, think they're going to bring her back here to tear up my life... rip all my plans and dreams to pieces all over again... For all I know they're bringing her back to rip my heart out despite all the oaths and promises she made not to. Oaths don't mean much to one who abandoned her faith, her god and her family – her small child."

"I won't let her touch you. If she comes, she dies. If she doesn't come, she dies. You are very, very safe, My Love." He felt her trembling with rage as his hands slipped beneath her robe to cup her breasts.

She paused in her rant as if startled, then relaxed against him. "Yes, I am. And no one is ever going to hurt me again."

Mephistis turned her in his arms, kissing her forehead and working his way down to the cleft between her breasts, murmuring between kisses, "Soon there will not be anyone left who can hurt you. Just as I promised."

A strangled sob forced its way past a sudden catch in Margren's throat, "You're the only one who's ever kept their promises to me... the only one."

"There will be others – others who recognize your worth." Mephistis gently pressed Margren backward onto the bed. "Together... we will bring this land to heel... punish those who have caused you so much pain... so much sorrow and loneliness."

As his body began to move in rhythm atop hers, Margren released herself to pleasure and ceased to think about her sister for the first time in days.

\* \* \* \*

On a rocky beach, curled into a fetal ball around a bottle of whiskey, a drunk woke screaming in a desolation of the soul more deep than death. He had found himself this small corner, little more than a wedge of large stones last night when he realized the drink was close to overcoming him, rather than trying to make it home. Josh often did that. Eventually someone would come looking for him. They always did since Aeijys took him in. The Vorgeni called him Josh the Sot, or more often simply The Sot and left it at that. No one else invoked as much contempt in the town as Josh.

Sand crusted his grey-brown hair and untidy beard. The bridge of his nose, crooked from a childhood break, was squarish and his chin was blunt like pushed-in clay. He reeked of whiskey and vomit, yet he pulled the cork and got another drag down, causing his stomach to heave again. Josh slapped at the cobwebs of images still lodged in his half sleeping mind. Demons on thin legs pranced through his thoughts and tore him with knives that left no blood in their wake. He twisted and howled again.

A voice echoed in his mind, "Once there were three brothers, Brandrahoon, Isranon

called Dawnhand, and Waejonan the Accursed."

Josh screamed and howled, clutching his bottle, gulping at it. He raised his eyes and stared out at the waters, thinking how easy it would be to simply walk out far enough into the tide to let the undertow catch him, to let the terror end, to let it all be over. He straightened and started toward the water, feeling the fear draining out of him as he listened to the waves. Josh kept swigging from the bottle as he walked into the water. Suddenly, seemingly from out of nowhere, a group of children rushed around him and he hesitated.

"Grandfather is looking for you," shouted a little girl, her black hair in two braids and sand coating her buckskins.

Josh blinked and the lure of the water was broken. Yes, he thought, someone always comes looking. Before Aejys, it had been just Branch and his grandchildren and great grandchildren. The old Kwaklahmyn shaman had befriended him when he was a child. Now there were many watchers, as if they all recognized the despair in his soul. But his despair came from within. He had Aejys and others now who cared. So long as they were around he did not feel that void as keenly and could distract himself from his awareness of it. It was only there, pounding in his awareness, when he found himself alone.

## CHAPTER ONE. DEADLY PROMISES

The City-State of Vorgensburg sat on the northernmost point of Sophren Bay, sheltered from the worst of the seasonal storms by the rainshadow of a long, jutting northwestern spur of mountains. The wet temperate region was more suited to fishing than farming with the lush growth of the northern rain forests, pines, fir, evergreen and red oaks covering a rocky soil unfriendly to less substantial flora. The fisher folk lived alongside a growing merchant class who bought furs, herbs and delicately carved cedar boxes, furniture, and basketry from the Kwaklahmyn villages to the north, which they traded in the south for spices, porcelains, incense, and a great variety of drugs and medicines.

The Cock and Boar tavern was fuller than usual, owing to the fact that for the last five days the three o'clock breeze had not come and the weather was unusually hot, which brought folks seeking a satisfying tankard of the good Neridian ale the proprietor had just laid in. All across the city those who could took refuge in the cool shadowed taverns and taprooms of the city where they could comfort themselves with a pint.

Becca deWythe, tavern master of the Cock and Boar and de facto seneschal of Aejys' growing household and expanding properties, emerged from supervising the kitchen, tray in hand. She felt bound and determined to make this a very good day for the tavern. A very important discussion was going on upstairs between the owner and the city-syndics, which could benefit all of them. Becca was one of those folks

who tended to jump in when a task needed doing or was not being done to her taste rather than delegating it or brow-beating her employees. That late afternoon, in addition to the over-flow of customers, They short-handed by two: one girl had run off with a sailor and the other had come down ill. Aeajys Rowan would not let her people work sick. The gangling youth that had been recently hired was not ready to handle the late afternoon rush that came with the return of the fishing fleet. So Becca pitched in to help.

Until two years ago Becca had been a mere serving woman at the Cock and Boar, waiting tables and occasionally turning tricks to make ends meet. Then her best customer, Aeajys Rowan, bought the place and promoted her twice, raising her to heights she never dreamed of reaching. A bosomy woman with a tiny waist and boyish hips, Becca stood five feet six. A wide-necked white blouse discretely covered her high ample breasts. Her burgundy skirt hung to her calves and clung to her legs and a triangle of matching cloth held her chestnut hair back. As she moved from table to table, her hips swayed coquettishly, more out of habit than advertising, though she had done a fair bit of that in less prosperous times. Every man in the room watched her hungrily, wishing they could find themselves between those legs one sweet night. Some remembered the taste of her from earlier days; yet not one made the slightest untoward comment or grab at her, for there was a half-breed ogre living in the inn's stable that would smash the first one to try.

She had just set three tankards down on a table occupied by sailors whose ship had put in that morning and started back for the kitchen when the door opened and three more customers came in. Becca had never seen them before. They stood looking around as if for someone they knew. She measured and weighed them in a single shrewd glance. The male, a half breed sylvan to judge by the breadth of his shoulders and deep ivory tones of his skin, was as fine a piece of manhood as Becca had ever seen. Becca prided herself on having sampled the bedroom artistry of all the races of the coast, but had never tasted the wares of the woodland peoples because of their rarity in the region. Seeing this one triggered a moment of speculation, a wisp of fantasy, and a tingle between her thighs, all of which she shoved away with a toss of her head. "If he's still here when things slow down," she muttered, sweeping her gaze over him once more.

A silver circlet wrought like tiny leaves held the heavy masses of his curling auburn hair in place and, though combed to conceal them, the delicate tips of his pointed ears showed through. He carried a yew bow almost as long as he was tall, a slender sword hung at his hip and he wore the simple rustic green tunic and breeches of the Sharani yeomynry.

Two Sharani women flanked him, dressed and armed as he was; both black-haired and a head taller than the half-breed; both boyishly slender, hard and well muscled, with modest breasts. The older one carried herself with the cool pride of a woman accustomed to command. The burnished bronze of her skin was a shade lighter than Aeajys Rowan's. She wore her smoky black hair pulled back in a simple tail. Becca

guessed her age at early twenties, then reminded herself that the usual measurements were less than precise when applied to members of the long-lived Sharani race: She could as easily be sixty as twenty. The woman's hands were scarred in the middle as if a narrow blade had been driven through each one. Becca started slightly: hadn't she heard stories during the Great War about a young woman with scarred hands?

The other, who looked to be a girl of sixteen, was an odd shade of walnut that didn't look quite real. Her green eyes drank everything in as if it were all incredibly new to her. Her high cheeks formed a delicate triangle with her small chin. Sensitivity and compassion lay in her glance and mischief in the turn of her mouth.

They drew every eye in the taproom: Sharani were rare along the coast. Becca observed the reactions of her patrons and, not knowing whether that might mean trouble despite the fact that the Cock and Boar was Sharani owned, intercepted the trio heading for the bar.

"Can I help you, sir? I am the tavern master," Becca said with crisp politeness, stepping in front of them.

The half-breed smiled shyly, his large dark green eyes, shaped like sidewise tear drops, shone. "I hope so," he said. "We are looking for Aeijys Rowan. I was told we could find her here." As he spoke, his eyes ran with longing toward the stairs leading to the apartments above as if searching for a glimpse of someone very precious.

"Aeijys can't be disturbed right now." Becca idly hugged her tray while tallying his physical attributes more closely. The knuckles of her left hand almost touched her chin. "Take a table and I'll let her know you're here as soon as can be."

The half-breed's brow furrowed, his mouth drew together in a worried way. "It is urgent we speak to her without delay," he said with soft insistence.

"No." Becca scowled in irritation, slid the tray onto a nearby table, and assumed a spread legged stance, arms folded. These days, it seemed to her, everyone wanted to see Aeijys and wanted to see her now. An unspoken part of her job was keeping them away or at least delayed when more important things were occurring. "There's a deputation from the city syndics up there negotiating to make Aeijys lord-mayor. Nothing interrupts this. You hear me? Nothing. Give me any trouble and I'll have Grymlyken put you all out."

"We hear you," said the older woman stepping protectively in front of the half-breed. "Now. You. Hear. Us." Her quiet voice was like a sword sheathed in velvet. "This is a matter of life and death. You will tell Aeijys we are here. Immediately."

Becca stared at her a moment, wincing away from the intensity of the Sharani's stare. Her stomach tightened, she recognized the urgency and knew they had come a very long way, months of travel, to get here from Shaurone; yet in spite of that

Becca deeply resented being pushed around by anyone, especially now that she finally had some power to back up her resistance. In the few seconds of indecision, her resentments poured lava-like up from her stomach into her throat, overwhelming her reason and intuition.

"Grymlyken!" Becca shouted. Her bouncers, a baker's dozen pixies cast aside their invisibility, appearing seemingly out of the air around Becca with hands resting on the hilts of their tiny swords. Their determined swarming tactics could be worse than getting hit with a hornet's nest while their dense physical structure made them nearly unsquashable.

Cassana Odaren glanced at the pixies from the corner of her eyes without acknowledging them, but her tone grew grim as her voice went softer and lower. "Tell Aeijstrys Mohandon brye Rowan that Cassana brye Odaren and Brendorn arn Rowan, are here to see her. And do it now before I decide to pull this place down around your ears!"

Uncertainty entered Becca's face. She had never heard Aeijys' formal Sharani name before. It lent a weight and seriousness to the matter. Furthermore she suspected the woman could more than make good on her threat. But the most doubt-stirring thing was Cassana's name. It matched the scars on her hands. Becca remembered the stories now. Although Vorgensburg had been only on the furthestmost periphery of the Great War, if this was indeed Cassana Odaren, then Becca knew that she was not one to be trifled with.

Grymlyken stepped forward, a prancing, mincing motion, his head screwed up to see Cassana better. His eyes widened and his lips formed an exaggerated "O" as he murmured "Omagosh!" Grymlyken frantically yanked Becca's apron. "That's her all right. That's her. That's Cassana Odaren. I saw her during the war. You don't want to mess with her, you don't."

That finished off the tavern master. Becca gasped and flushed. Her large eyes went a little wider, "You truly are Cassana Odaren?"

The question was rudely phrased, a mere tavern master did not address the nobility in that way, even someone else's nobility, but Cassana answered politely. "I am. Now please take us to Aeijys."

"She ah ... knows you, doesn't she?" Becca's flush deepened.

"I think so," Brendorn answered softly, a small secret smile turning faintly on the edges of his mouth. He could almost feel the touch of her hands, the brush of her lips; see again the strength in her that had always called to him. Even when she had returned home gravely wounded, near death from physical and magical injuries that no one believed could be healed, that same stubborn strength had carried her through. Then before she could recover completely, she had simply fled, leaving behind a note that said it was the best for all of them.



The youngest of Brendorn's companions burst into hearty uncontrolled laughter multiplying Becca's discomfort ten fold and jostling Brendorn out of his moment's reverie.

Becca's eyes slitted sidewise at her, she straightened, took a deep breath, struggled for composure and grimly resisted both an urge to flee and a desire to scream for Clemmerick the ogre stableman to come pound the laughing girl. "Follow me," she said, her voice taking on a prim quality. "You can stand by the door while I announce you, then if Aeajys says okay, you can go on in."

They followed Becca up the stairs at the end of the common room, down an oak paneled hall and stopped at an expensively carved mahogany door. All the way up Tamlestari tried to stop laughing, but in spite of everything a tiny snicker or a giggle escaped to plague Becca and draw the disapproving glances of her companions.

Becca glared at the girl, then entered the room.

As soon as the tavern master was out of sight, Brendorn turned and clamped a hand over Tamlestari's mouth. "Try holding your breath," he suggested exasperated. "If Laeoli acted like you I would turn her over my knee and spank her, no matter how old she was."

Tamlestari pried his upper fingers loose and said through the rest of his muffling grip, "Like to see you try." She shifted slightly as if for a hip throw, laughing harder.

Cassana caught the girl by the collar, and then pulled Brendorn's hands away, gently yet firmly. She shook her head at him. Brendorn sighed and stepped back. Cassana took her niece by the shoulders, gave her a small shake. "If you don't stop this," she said severely, "you can spend the rest of the day standing in the Hall while we take care of business. You understand?"

Tamlestari sobered instantly, her eyes dropped, her cheeks grew warm. "I'm sorry, Amita Sana. On my honor, I won't do it again."

"I know you won't," Cassana replied, giving her a hug.

Brendorn stood back, dropping his eyes, and shaking his head at the mercurial young hoyden's sudden change from irritatingly playful to sober and restrained. She had trained heavily as a battlefield surgeon during her days in the temple preparing to become ha'taren, one of the consecrated paladins of the God Aroana the Compassionate Defender. Yet, even after her consecration and a series of skirmishes along the border, the young mon remained as unpredictable, headstrong and changeable as ever, childishly playful and impulsive one moment and then mature beyond her years the next. He sighed, reminding himself to be grateful that his own daughter Laeoli had turned out so calm and steady.

He realized suddenly that he had begun to tremble uncontrollably and leaned against the wall to conceal it. Fear that she would simply send them away alternated with a dream vision of finding her in his arms again. He had never been a warrior; never been more than a simple gardener, cherishing his flowers and fruits and he remembered how after coming back from a patrol or fighting she had always looked so happy to just be with him in his gardens – how serene those moments had been and how much he cherished them. And their passion in the night – no, he dared not go down that path until he had seen her; he wanted it too desperately, felt too overwhelmed by need for her.

Aejys, Brendorn murmured silently to himself, maybe we'll finally know why you ran away from us... O! Lord of Woodlands! Please let her say yes. Let her come home again. Life is so empty without her.

\* \* \* \*

That morning the syndics had come again to petition Aejys Rowan to take the helm of their city because they quite simply did not believe anyone else could handle it. Most of their problems came from outside the city, from the monster haunted wilderness and from monstrous men who preyed on their shipping, raided their city during the spring months and took toll of the caravans and various folks on the highroads. The walls were in disrepair and the guardsmyn who walked them understaffed, under-trained, and poorly led. They could have hired kandoyarin out of Ocealay to the south, mercenaries such as those commanded by Johannes Redbeard, but feared that would be like asking the cat to dine with the mice.

The syndics knew all of the rumors that clung to Aejys Rowan like a spider-web cloak. She was a lapsed paladin who had drifted far from her faith and her people: that much they knew for certain. By most accounts she was a maverick Sharani heir who had renounced her place in the aristocracy by telling her queen and family to go swim in the midden pond over some trifling matter. Some said Aejys had actually thrown the queen in. A very few said she was just another out of work soldier who had drifted into their city and her name wasn't really Aejys Rowan at all.

But as the months had passed they watched the soldier kill a great wyrm for its treasure and with only her own household defeat a raiding ship out of Brunstrat. So they grew more certain with each passing day that she was the Lion of Rowanslea, Aejystrys brye Rowan, who had commanded the Lionhawk's rearguard during the Allied push into Waejontor when the war had finally turned against the Banewitch Realm; and then vanished. However, no one knew for sure and Aejys wasn't telling.

They sat in comfortably padded claw armed chairs around a large horseshoe table set in the middle of a long room. Pastries, fruit, and pitchers of golden Neridian ale sat at intervals around the table. Aejys had lured away Duke Aaron of Beltria's most celebrated baker and rarely let visiting syndics forget it. Most of them were middle-aged men in dark silks and fine hosen. There were only two women in the

room besides Aejs: Marya Maryasdottir, a stout matron who ran the weaver's guild; and Tagalong Smith, Aejs' dwarf companion in arms.

Tagalong sat at Aejs' right hand near the head of the table with her legs pulled up into the chair and crossed. A beaded Kwaklahmyn headband attempted to hold in check the unruly mass of shoulder-length crimson hair framing her broad blunt face. Although she did not carry her sword at home, her ever-present war hammer hung from her wide belt.

Opposite Tagalong, at Aejs' left hand, sat the second member of Aejs' inner circle: Josh, who was sober for a change. A neatly-trimmed brown beard that was heavily streaked with grey framed Josh's deeply seamed, battered face, and red abraded complexion. He looked two decades older than his nearly thirty odd years. His forefinger moved in nervous circles, rarely still for long. He never raised his eyes to anyone's face, yet he listened to everyone. Aejs always included him, although no one ever understood why she had adopted the town drunk in the first place. She did a lot of things no one understood, but it had made her rich.

Beside him Thomas Cedarbird, the youngest and richest merchant in the city, son of a Kwaklahmyn father and Vorgen mother, leaned forward on his elbows to better gauge the woman at the table's head. He held the best trading alliance with the Kwaklahmyn of any in Vorgensburg by way of his father's lineage in the ruling family and a substantial fleet inherited from his maternal grandfather. He was also a legend in local circles for he had been the first to sail round the Cape of Jedrua. Cedarbird spearheaded the effort to draft Aejs. They had now been arguing for over an hour.

"To accept our offer would not only be good for Vorgensburg, it would be beneficial to you," Cedarbird insisted. "We need a warrior at the helm to lead us in defense of the city, to guide us in the ways that will make us safe from the pirates and raiders. You need our contacts, goods, and experience if you want your new merchant fleet to prosper."

"Is that a threat or a bribe?" Aejs Rowan tamped the tobacco down in her pipe, struck a lucifer, and lit it. She drew on the pipe thoughtfully for a moment, letting smoke slide out from the corners of her mouth. Her large steel gray eyes had the look of an old lion, comfortable and secure in its power, in a deceptively young face that was just a little too squared at jaw and too wide at the cheekbones to be called oval; too rounded and long to be called square. Her lips were large, ruddy and, when she let them be, expressive; her skin was a glossy red brown that might almost be called bronze. Her long, thick smoky black hair hung in a leather wrapped tail with a brief tuft of hair showing at the bottom. She wore a short, sleeveless brown silk tunic over a deep-sleeved cream shirt buttoned at the cuff and tight fitting pants, the legs stuffed into knee high boots. A longsword with an intricate golden lion hilt hung at her side next to a pair of soft leather gloves shoved through her belt.

"Neither. We are suggesting an alliance, if you will. You become Lord Mayor of

Vorgensburg and protect us. We give you the benefit of our knowledge."

Aejys shook her head slowly. "I regret having to say this once more and it will be the last time I submit to one of these meetings – but I do not wish to rule Vorgensburg." She turned to directly face Thomas. "You're the instigator, Thomas," Aejys said nonchalantly. "Bother me again, and I'll have you banned from my establishments."

The young mon flushed. "But surely the Lion of Rowanslea–"

Tagalong gasped, choked on a mouthful of ale, and spewed it back into her tankard. Then her eyes shot to Aejys'. "There, that's torn it," she muttered darkly. They had finally confronted Aejys with their suspicions; Tagalong suspected that voicing it had been a slip of the tongue; otherwise it was unusually poor judgment on Thomas's part.

The color had risen in Aejys' face, the line of her mouth stiffened, and sudden rage burned in her gray eyes. "Don't ever – you hear me – ever call me that again. The Lion of Rowanslea is dead. She died taking Bucharsa Temple." As she spoke fury mounted in her voice. "Is that what has been going on all these months, Thomas? You think I am the Lion of Rowanslea? You want the Lion of Rowanslea to defend your damned city? To fight all your battles for you?" She rose from her chair and slammed her fists on the table. "Get out! Get out – all of you!"

The syndics rose like a flock of startled pigeons. Several protested, but when Aejys started toward them they decided that discretion was the better part of valor and fled for the door just as Becca opened it. Tagalong grinned, watching them jostle the tavern master. She knew if they shoved her too much the tavern master would haul off and take a poke at one, rank not withstanding. Becca could be a bit spiky and Tagalong had a streak of mischief that liked to see her react.

Tagalong glanced at Aejys and saw that she was cooling down rapidly. The dwarf knew Aejys Rowan as a person who blew up quick and cooled down quicker. Tagalong slid out of her chair and came around behind Thomas who tried to linger. Aejys caught him by the arm and started him toward the door. "Go on, Thomas. We're still friends, but not right now. Go away."

Thomas brushed past Becca with a good deal more dignity than the others. As the door closed behind him, Aejys burst out laughing. She laughed so hard she had to hold her sides. "You think I finally convinced them, Tag?"

"That yer crazy? Probably," Tagalong said, smirking. She loved uproar. "But ya know, Aejys, those that matter have it figured out and losing yer temper confirms it."

"I know. I resigned myself to it weeks ago." Aejys smiled, clapping the sturdy dwarf on the shoulder. "You are not my only source of gossip, Tag."

"I'm not?" Tagalong feigned surprise. "Ya turned them down again, but what are ya going to do next time the town has trouble with Brunstrat?"

Aejys gnawed on her lower lip. "Same thing I did last time..."

"Then yer doin' the job without getting' the title."

"I don't want the responsibility."

"You've already got it."

"Shit."

Tagalong grinned widely, "I'm putting the word on the street yer holding out fer King."

Aejys stared at the ceiling and rolled her eyes.

Then Tagalong remembered Becca, "What's goin' on?"

"Aejys, there's people to see you," Becca looked from one to the other with silent disapproval. She had wanted Aejys to take the position and felt miffed that she clearly had not.

"More people?" Aejys straightened and clapped Becca on the shoulder. "Be a good mon, and tell them to go away. I'm tired of people. I want to be left alone for a while. I haven't had lunch, I'm sick of pastries and my tobacco pouch is empty."

"I can't."

"What?"

Becca winced but stood her ground. And even Aejys knew there were limits to how far you pushed Becca. "They're Cassana brye Odaren and Brendorn arn Rowan."

Aejys stopped in her tracks, her heart skipped a beat at Brendorn's name – she had told no one about her family and almost nothing about her past except for a few carefully phrased and related war stories – and her next words evaporated. She sucked in a long breath, closed her eyes just long enough to rub her hands over them, and then blew the breath out with an odd sigh. "You're certain that's who they are?"

"Grymlyken recognizes the ajan."

Josh sighed, dropped his head, and left through a side door without being asked. An air of panic hung about his folded shoulders as if he knew something no one else did.

\* \* \* \*

Becca ushered them in. Tagalong's whole face brightened with joyous excitement as her friends entered. She gave a loud cry of greeting and leaped at Brendorn, throwing her arms around the slender half-breed's legs and hoisting him off the ground. He kissed the top of the dwarf's head. "I'm happy to see you too, Tag," he said as she set him down.

Tagalong spun around and seized the older mon, lifting her in turn. Then she stood back, rubbing the scarred hands with her thumbs. "Been a long time. They don't hurt anymore?"

"Only in the winter. And when it rains." Cassana smiled quietly.

"That's better than it was."

"Much."

Tagalong nodded. "Good."

Becca watched from the doorway, smiling at their evident joy and remembering her own loved ones left behind many years before when she ran away from her father's farm to find a better life in the city.

Tagalong suddenly remembered the tavern master and, catching Becca by the elbow, propelled her down the hall before she could say anything. "That's Brendorn, her ba'halaef. Let's giv'em some space."

"Ba'halaef?" Becca asked curiously as Tagalong took her arm and walked out with her.

"It's like a husband. Only with less rights than ya folks give'em round here. Functions the same though, if ya get my drift," Tag grinned with lecherous approval as she bubbled over with information while watching closely for Becca's reaction. "Bout time Aejs sent fer him. She needs ta get Laeoli, that's their daughter – Laeolytyn's her formal name, but they call her Laeoli ya understand – and Ladonys, that's Laeoli's womb mother—they call it a ma'aramlasah and the blood mother is the ma'aram – outta there."

"Womb-mother?" Becca's eyebrows quirked, "Then it's true, what they say. One woman conceives and another bears it."

"Sharani are triadic. It's the only way the entire triad becomes its parents. They call it kyndi, but I wouldn't use that word around the Sharani. It's just fer them. Makes fer a lot of twins that way."

"Twins?"

"What else when ya got three in a bed," Tagalong's mouth screwed up in a smug twist as she delivered her coup.

Becca's cheeks warmed and she stammered, "Oh, right. Three in a bed. Of course. Twins." As delicious as Brendorn looked, Becca felt herself rapidly losing interest.

Tagalong did not tell her the whole story of the kyndi, of how the golden banewitch queen of Waejontor had cursed the Sharani more than a millennium ago causing nearly all their male children to be miscarried or still born. They had appealed to Ishla Twice-Gendered, God of Love, Fertility and Technology for aid in removing the curse.

But Ishla was not a remover of curses. Instead she altered their genetics. By enabling a pregnant woman to pass her embryo to another, by way of a magical phenomenon called the kyndi, she made it possible for one woman to bear the children for both. A child then shared the womb mother's genetic inheritance along with the blood mother and sire. That the curse had been ended – by five Sharani heroes, a quest the only survivors of which had been Tamlestari's wombmother and her young sister, Cassana – had done only a little to lift the birth and survival rate of Sharani male infants.

\* \* \* \*

Aejys Rowan stood apart from the joyful scene, her mood gone melancholy. There was a small, almost imperceptibly sad twist to her full lips. Her eyes misted watching Brendorn kiss the top of Tagalong's head. She folded her arms, repressing her desire to join in, holding herself aloof, and wondering whether they would greet her with as much joy or if it would be reproof. She had deserted her family, fleeing a dangerous situation she could not alter. She had no rights to his affection and love, or even his friendship. Yet her arms ached to clasp him. She did not know why they had come, but she suspected, even feared, that it had nothing to do with love. For seven long years she had dreamed of reunion with him and the rest of her small family, even while she rode farther and farther away from them.

She dragged in an uncertain breath as they approached. He had always been the only kind and gentle thing in her rock hard life, the one unmitigated joy. Only in his arms had she ever found true peace, even for a moment, in her troubled, war-torn life. "Brendorn?" Her hands shook. She clasped them together while a roar of emotion – shame, love, pain, filled her mind with confusion. Aejys realized that she was on the edge of losing it as she stammered: "I – I meant to send for you, Brendorn. On my honor." Impulsively her hands came up, reached for him, and drew back.

"Aejys," he spoke her name softly, as hesitant as she, yet longing crept into his tone, "I know you did."

He extended both hands to her. Aejys clasped them and drew him into her arms. She covered his lips with hers, bending a little to reach him. They kissed deeply, hungrily. When Aejys pulled back finally, tears streaked both their faces. "God's heart, I've missed you," she said.

Brendorn nodded. "And I you."

"I just couldn't get the words right."

"You never had to," he said with a small smile. "I always read between your words. You did what you thought best for all of us."

His words, although meant to reassure and comfort, nevertheless, brought a twist of sadness to her heart, making her cling to him all the harder and he to her as if in a single moment they could press all the love from seven absent years into that one embrace.

"Aejys..."

At the sound, she turned from Brendorn to Cassana, embracing the woman warmly, "Old friend."

She stood back, saw then the way they stood together, and suspicion entered her mind. "This looks like a deputation," she said. "If you're asking me to come back, forget it. There's no place for me there."

Cassana's scarred hand touched Aejys' arm. "You must come home! There's trouble."

"It isn't my trouble," Aejys replied, regaining her composure. "I'm sending for my family. They can come out here, but I'm not going back." She looked at Brendorn to confirm this, but he dropped his eyes to stare uncomfortably at the floor. Suddenly she realized how far they had come, a journey of months, whatever was happening had to be crucial, and that roused her old instincts to protect and stand fast at need. "Ma'aram?"

"No. Kaethreyn is fine." Cassana told her. "Can we sit down?"

"Come in to the parlor." Aejys laid her pipe and pouch on top of a bowl of fruit, caught the handle on a pitcher of ale, and, carrying it all, led them into the next room.

Tamlestari tarried long enough to snag a tray of pastries, some extra tankards, and a full pitcher, then followed.

\* \* \* \*



"She turned them down again, didn't she?" Becca stretched her legs and strode along, forcing the dwarf to trot to keep up. Irritation flashed across Tagalong's face. Becca allowed herself a brief smug smile at this. Her glance swept every face as they passed through the common room. Several of Aeijys' household cavalry, who guarded her trade wagons in transit, were taking their lunch. "Wagons are in," she observed in passing.

"Yah. If Aeijys wanted that kind of responsibility she'd'ave stayed home in Rowanslea. I saw some wagons come in as we went upstairs. Ya got'em unloaded yet?"

"There hasn't been time. I'm short handed in the taproom." Becca poked her head into the kitchen. "Take plates of cold meats, cheese, bread, sauces and a pitcher of each of our best brews up to Lord Aeijys' parlor. Enough for four."

A tall mon nodded as he wielded a broad paddle, shoving loaves into the ovens. "I'll start on it now," he told her.

"Good," Becca said, turning toward the back door.

"Well let's get to it," Tagalong said grinning.

Becca spied Zacham sweeping the walk as they emerged from the building into the courtyard quad. The ten-year old's unkempt black hair hung in long tangled ringlets. A spattering of dark freckles made a band across his snub nose and cheeks contrasting sharply with the pale butterscotch complexion. He came to attention when he spied Becca and Tagalong looking at him.

Four wagons with tall sideboards and barrels of provisions piled high stood in the yard. Clemmerick the hostler led two teams to the watering troughs beside the stable. The ogre stood eight feet tall. The big horses he handled were the size of large dogs beside him. His straight, jet black hair parted in the middle hung just past his shoulders; his sloe eyes had a bland expression that concealed a deep philosophical mind and sharp intellect. His complexion rivaled milk in its whiteness and large triangles of bright pink marked his rounded cheeks in an otherwise broad plain face.

"Where are the drivers?" Becca asked.

"Getting a bite, Mistress," said Zacham, nodding politely. "They waited till their stomachs was aching with need."

"Master," Becca corrected him, frowning slightly. "This is a Sharani establishment."

Zacham flushed. "Shall I get them?"

"No. They've earned their bread. Fetch Omer and Raim to unload."

Zacham leaned the broom so quickly against the wall of the building that it slid down as he moved away, darting off to fetch the two myn.

Tag opened a wagon's gate and climbed in. "Show me some muscle, Becca. Ya're always telling me ya got some."

"I've never—"

"Ah, come on, Becca!" Tagalong smiled innocently as she began needling the tavern master. Paybacks are hell. "What happened to that 'anything ya can do, I can do better' ya've been shovin' in my face fer months! Ya just a wussy outlands woman after all?"

Becca twisted inwardly, trying hard not to take the bait. "I'm as good with a scythe and flail as any of my brothers! Always was!"

"Not talkin' about scythes an' flails, Becca. We're talkin' about barrels."

Becca flushed angrily. "Just hand me down the barrels, damn it!"

The stout dwarf lifted a huge barrel of flour easily, giving it to Becca. The tavern master staggered under the weight as Tagalong released it. With every muscle in her arms, back and legs heaving Becca managed to wrestle the barrel to the ground, missing her foot by inches. Then Tagalong seized another and shoved it at her. Becca caught it. She felt as if her arms were going to be wrenched from the sockets and then abruptly the weight was taken from her.

"Let me help you, Becca." Clemmerick towered over the tavern master, setting the barrel down as if it weighed nothing. He was not handsome, yet there was an indefinable quality that made his ugliness appealing.

"Stay out of this, Clemmerick!" Becca cried indignantly. "Tag and I are settling matters."

Clemmerick smiled fondly. "You two are always needling each other. Always challenging... At least make it fair," said the ogre. "Becca, you climb up on this wagon over here. Each of you hand me a barrel. I'll put Tag's over there and yours here," he indicated the spots with a nod. "First one to unload their wagon completely wins. Without dropping anything. Agreed?"

The two women nodded. Becca hitched up her skirts and climbed into the wagon Clemmerick indicated.

"Ya need pants fer this job, Becca," Tag told her. "Yer gonna step on yer skirts and fall on yer face 'fore yer half finished."

"I don't think so," Becca replied icily. She gave her skirts a twist and tucked the

bottom into her belt.

"If she wins, you buy her a pair, Tag," said Clemmerick.

"Ya got it!"

Clemmerick smiled. A crowd gathered as the women worked. Omer and Raim shook their heads in puzzlement at the bosses doing their work, but did not question it aloud. The drivers joined them next, then the caravan guard and the customers. Soon they were laying bets. The general consensus held that few human women were as strong as the sturdy dwarf and Becca was not one of them.

Anger fueled Becca's muscles with greater than usual strength. She worked swiftly, muttering curses under her breath.

Clemmerick, standing between the wagons, made two piles of barrels. A cheer went up from the tiny handful that had placed their bets on the tavern master. Slowly Becca gained on Tagalong, opened a widening lead, and then it was over. Becca finished first.

"Father of Stone crack a mountain! Damn it!" Tagalong shouted, her cheeks burning as bright as her hair. She sprang down and started for the door.

"Hand over some gold, Tag, so she can go for a fitting," Clemmerick said.

"But who'll take care of things? It's nearly dinner!" Tagalong protested, extending a handful of gold and silver coins to the ogre.

Clemmerick smiled, "You've got the entire kitchen staff hard at work. I'm sure you can manage." He pressed the coins into Becca's hands. "Go on, I'll catch up soon as I finish here," he told her.

The ogre worked quickly to remove the evidence before anyone could discover he had given Becca the lighter stuff to unload. Becca, unaccustomed to moving heavy things, would never know the difference, but Tagalong would. Then he strode off whistling merrily down the street to the tailor's shop just so he could walk back with Becca.

\* \* \* \*

Aejys settled her friends on comfortable chairs flanking a modest round table. Tamlestari, clearly tired of trail food, stuffed pastries in her mouth and licked her fingers appreciatively. A knock on the door preceded the entrance of servants with trays of sliced cheese, cold meats and bread; and sauces, pitchers of various brews and tankards. Aejys' eyes dwelled on Brendorn, being near him, knowing he still cared, lit a heat in her veins and a warmth in her heart that burned away a loneliness she had never realized she felt until it was gone. As soon as the servants had

departed, she leaned across and kissed him again.

"Well, what's this all about?" Aejs opened her pouch to refill her pipe and remembered that it was empty. Without waiting for an answer she crossed the room and stuffed the pouch full from a jar on a window shelf.

"Margren has hired someone to kill you, and afterwards Laeli," Cassana said.

Aejs' body straightened, coming to attention, her pulse quickening. Her eyes narrowed to slits and her hand paused for just an instant before replacing the jar lid. She filled her pipe, lit it before responding with an edge sharp enough to flay spirits slid in her voice. "Me, I can understand," she said smoothly, "My sister has always hated me," she returned to the table, no not always, she amended silently, remembering what a sweet child her sister had been. "But why Laeli? She's just a little girl."

Brendorn took Aejs' hand in both of his. "My love, our daughter isn't little anymore. She's fourteen. She's of age next year."

"Fourteen?" Aejs felt startled for a moment and her voice betrayed her. She had known in her mind how many years had passed, but not in her heart and never considered the implications nor anything else that might have forced her out of her safe emotional exile. "I had not realized how long it has been. I meant to send for you all." Her eyes met Brendorn's pleading for his belief, for his faith in her.

Brendorn gave that faith willingly. "I know," he said, his hand reaching to cover hers as she came to his side.

"Two springs past," Cassana explained, "Around the time you killed the great wurm, your ma'aram, Kaethreyn named Laelytyn her heir."

"Damnation under God!" Aejs ground her teeth on the pipe, then pulled it out and rubbed the bowl with her thumb. Everything I retreated from is coming after me again. "All Margren ever wanted was the mar'ajante. She'll kill to have Rowanslea."

"I begged Kaethreyn to give the lands and title to Margren," Brendorn's voice took on a forlorn note. "Kaethreyn said that Margren was unfit to rule. That she would never give it to her, even if Margren were her only living child. But she would not accept that Margren might harm Laeli. We parted less than friends. She said she would not keep Laeli from you, but that you would have to ask her for the child face to face."

"We've all tried to get Laeli out," Cassana said. "But short of kidnapping, which would precipitate a clan war, your mother has blocked our every effort. You are the only one she can't argue with. The only one who can get Laeli out."

"Do it soon." The young walnut colored girl spoke with a frank openness at once

startling and intriguing to Aejs. "I fear for Laeli. The Ajan Margrenan frightens me."

Aejys looked closely at her for the first time. "Do I know you?"

"This is my niece," Cassana told her, patting the girl's arm fondly. "Tamlestari Odaren Desharen, Geoa and Kalestari's child. Tamlestari and Laeli are very close."

Aejys sucked on her pipe, scrutinizing the girl carefully. She leaned forward and ran her hand through the girl's hair then checked her fingertips. A black smudge showed on them. "You're a blond, like your ma'aram." Nine years – I still can't believe Kalestari is dead. Always thought she would outlive us all. "She used a better dye. After the first washing it didn't come off on my fingers." She touched the girl's cheek. "And you stain your skin. She didn't." Aejs knew she had struck a nerve when Tamlestari erupted at her.

"So I'm the wrong colors!" she snapped. "From all that I've heard, I thought you at least would not make an issue of it."

Aejys settled back with a deep sigh, wishing she had not spontaneously turned the conversation in this direction. Now that she had, she was committed to finishing it. Aejs had a stubborn streak, which brooked no retreat – from anything: even embarrassment. She smiled with the pipe between her teeth, pulled it out to speak again. "Kalestari was not Sharani born, but she was as Sharani as any of us," she explained patiently. "We didn't know what she was until the end. You're at least half, I'll wager. With two Sharani heroes for ma'arams, you're just as Sharani as any. Anyone says otherwise in my hearing will regret it. I promise you."

The statement took the youth by surprise and Tamlestari's glare softened just a little. "I wish more people felt that way."

"Your sire?"

"Thendaric of the West Temple."

A small sad smile brushed the edges of Aejs' mouth. "He was a fine singer and a gentle soul." Aejs had led the ultimately unsuccessful effort to break the siege of the West Temple. The Waejontori destroyed the temple-city, butchered the inhabitants down to the smallest newborn. That Aejs had afterward destroyed that Waejontori force was small comfort to her. So much of my life died in the war. Then perversely she thought trust Kalestari to prefer a temple stud to a committed relationship with a man.

"Let's get on with it," Aejs said, re-lighting her pipe. "How am I supposed to fall? Do you know?"

"Farendarc," Tamlestari exhaled the name as though it hurt. Youth and innocence

faded from her face, replaced by a mature seriousness.

Aejys' stomach tightened, then gave a little queasy roll as if the bottom had just dropped out. She knew his reputation. "One of the best." Why now, God? Just as my life starts to straighten out. Just as I finally have a place to bring my family.

Cassana leaned forward, her elbows planted on the table. "Farendarc took second in swords at the Aroanan Games the last year before the War broke out."

"I no longer recall, is he Sharani or an import?"

"Sharani."

"They banned him from the games two years ago," Tamlestari said. "In the finals Lareth Reslaaren marked his face, a tiny scratch," her voice faltered when she spoke the woman's name as if pain beyond her years lay there. "He became enraged. And when he downed her he moved in and finished her. So they banned him."

"As few males as there are among our people, it's sad that one turned out like him," Cassana murmured, more to herself than her companions.

Aejys' eyes narrowed a little more and she stroked her lower lip with the pipe. "Is he as good as Kalestari was?"

"No," Cassana said. "But he bested Darya of Armaten. She was always better than you."

Another name of the dead. The pipe paused, then started again. "If Laeoli were here, Margren would have to burn six kingdoms to get to her. I don't think she's that crazy."

"You must not fight Farendarc." Brendorn said. "He'll kill you. You're a soldier, not a duelist. You are the only one that your ma'aram will yield Laeoli to."

"She can't avoid him," Tamlestari put in. "I have seen the lengths he will go to ... Farendarc will do anything to force her into a duel. He's done it before. With others. I know his patterns well. I studied him."

"You what?" Cassana's hand closed on Tamlestari's and she leaned nearer the girl. "Why?"

"Because I wanted to kill him. I know you don't like to hear this, Amita Sana, but I don't have a lot of friends. People don't like my color," she raised her eyes to Aejys', "most people that is. Not all. Lareth was my best friend. When I took my vows this past spring I planned to challenge Farendarc, so I tried to learn his weaknesses."

"And did you find any?" Brendorn asked, suddenly keenly interested, almost

hopeful.

"I don't think he has any," Tamlestari said, dropping her gaze and folding her left hand over her right fist.

Aejys nodded slowly. "I know his reputation. I can't run, Sana. And I can't hide. I won't hide. It would cost me everything I have built up here. My honor, as muddled as it may look on the surface, is still my life."

"Don't do this, Aejys." Brendorn pleaded. "Please don't fight him."

Aejys stared deep into his anguished face, seeing all the hopes and dreams renewed in their first embrace fading. "Brendorn. You ask me to forsake my honor?"

"I'm asking you to save our daughter."

"Take a contract out on him for god's sake!" exclaimed Cassana, slamming her hands down on the table.

"There may not be time for that," Aejys said slowly. "But I'll have Tag ask around. There's probably a guildhall hidden in Vorgensburg. But you know, all of you, once challenge is issued I cannot refuse it."

"Who will save Laeoli when you are dead?"

"Josh and Tag will. Don't underestimate them. If I can't take Farendarc down, I can take him with me. That will no doubt buy time." Aejys rose. "Now you must be tired and I need to get down to the south docks. They are refitting some ships for me. I'll have Becca show you to rooms. Brendorn, will you share mine?"

"Always."

\* \* \* \*

Josh the Sot sat at a small beer stained table in the far back corner of the taproom, hidden in the shadow of the stairs. He had seen their shadows through the door – Aejys' visitors – known who they would be before Becca even spoke their names. Josh had known for weeks that they had been coming. He had seen them in his dreams when he got drunk enough. He had also seen the black and crimson shadows trailing them, the dangers to Aejys, but he had not spoken of them. It terrified him to speak of the magic. It made him shake and sent him running for the bottle. But the bottle only made it worse. Why, god? Why, when he had finally made peace with the magic's loss, give it back to him – twisted into a thing of horror? It would be so much easier to be dead. To stop feeling. He had tried wading out into waters toward the undertow, but could never quite find the nerve to see it through. And then there was that name that would echo through his drunken mind in the wee hours, "Abelard." A name he had never heard spoken aloud in this life.

His rough, weather-beaten hands framed a whiskey double without quite touching the glass. A bottle with just one drink taken out waited just a few inches north of his fingers. All his muscles seemed to twitch invisibly beneath his skin, every fiber of his body ached. Each morning he started out feeling clear and centered, hopeful and certain that this day he would feel good just being alive; but then he would encounter another person and another, with each meeting his muscles would begin to crawl beneath his skin as he interacted with them, even when it was a very small exchange, nothing more than a brief acknowledgement in passing. It would build like a physical manifestation of some weird psychic hysteria, the burning would start in his nerve endings, in the seared and blackened connections of his withered mage-net. By then Josh wanted to weep with fear and pain, gripped hard in the inescapable, inexorable gauntlet of sheer panic. Relief lay in that tiny glass and no one cared if he drank it. His throat and mouth longed for the smoky taste. The Sot longed for the sudden heat that raced through his veins and nerves when he drank it. Yet he hesitated.

In his youth he had gotten past this deep baffling physical and mental distress by sheer will power. He never asked himself why or where it came from, just knew a grinding need to repress it, shove it far down inside himself where it would never surface again. But it always came back. As he got older he turned more and more to the bottle as his strength of will slid down into a quagmire of terror, nightmares, and flashbacks, especially of the day six years ago that the archenwurm had sunk his father's ship just off the blowholes. Josh saw it eat his father and brother before he washed up on shore, the only survivor. Since then he had lost his war with the bottle completely: for the last six years he had rarely been sober.

Two years ago Josh showed Aeijys Rowan and Tagalong where to find the cave of the giant archenwurm that had sunk his ship thereby starting his four-year binge. When things went awry, Josh, in an act of booze-born bravery beyond the ken of the sane and sober, finished off the beast. As an accessory, not a partner, he had no part in the treasure, but Aeijys Rowan had vowed to provide for him for the rest of his days without judgments or recriminations in whatever way he chose to live those days. If he wished to live out his life in the grip of the bottle she would not refuse him: it was not her life to live, it was his. Aeijys Rowan never went back on her word.

Aeijys provided him with all that he wanted to drink as well as everything else he needed including two servants to pick him up when he passed out, clean him up, tuck him into bed and care for his hangovers.

Josh's problem began when Aeijys dosed him with a sylvan medicinal, holadil, to both get him over his hangover and keep him tractable enough to guide them to the wurm. In fact, she had dosed him twice since then for particularly bad hangovers. A very few humans were rumored to experience strange side effects and once the holadil got into their system it tended to stay there. For Josh the side effects only showed up when he drank, coming in an unconsciously accessed gallimaufry mess, random and unpredictable, of psychic phenomena and the twisted magic that



haunted him. Needless to say, Josh seriously considered giving up drink. But there was always a good reason, he told himself, for snagging that next bottle.

So he sat, his hands hovering around the whiskey and not quite daring to touch it.

"You okay, Josh?" Tagalong Smith settled into a chair across the table from him and drew her legs up so that her knees rested against the table edge. The handle of her hammer thunked the chair seat.

Josh yelped, snatched up the whiskey, glass, and bottle, and fled through the swinging doors into the kitchen. Tagalong stared dumfounded at his retreating back.

\* \* \* \*

In a big box stall in the northeast corner of the stable Gwyndar shook his big black-maned head impatiently watching the sot rush towards him. His forelock settled askew and a twisted horn just two handspans long glinted in the torchlight. At eighteen hands the wynderjyn, get of a unicorn stallion and a mare, towered over all but two of the other animals in the building: the wynderjyn of Cassana and Tamlestari. Josh paused at the stall gate, swallowed the little bit in the glass that remained unspilled by his mad dash, then darted in and burrowed under the straw.

Gwyndar nuzzled him questioningly.

"Something bad's going on. I know it!" Josh rasped, then uncorked the bottle, took a big swig, and burrowed deeper. The more drunk he became the more strongly he could feel the distant swirling of dark energies. He only felt safe from them hiding down in the straw beside Gwyndar as if the big animal could somehow protect him. Yet Josh knew it should be the other way around. The power was his, if he could find the strength to reach for it, but it terrified him. And that name whispered like a memory through his thoughts: Abelard. In his mind's eye he saw a darkened chamber and a woman with a wealth of dark hair who looked much like Aejs, only softer. She turned her neck to a man who twined about her in the throes of passion. His eyes were amaranthine, without whites, iris or pupils. Sa'necari. His lips parted and his fangs descended as the living necromancer with all the powers and appetites of the undead sank them into his lover's neck. Josh screamed into the straw, rejecting the vision, and passed out.

The big animal settled down around him to keep him warm as he always did.

\* \* \* \*

In the servants' quarters of the Cock and Boar, Tamlestari sat in a rough chair at the bedside of a coughing woman beneath a worn, patched and re-patched blanket. She threw some leaves into a pot of boiling water. Astringent steam rose, making Becca's nose wrinkle as she supported the woman, easing her up to inhale the vapors. The servant's face cleared and a little color returned.

A young girl stood in the doorway watching. Tamlestari nodded at her. The girl joined her. Tamlestari pulled several vials of powder and bottles of liquids of various colors from a large satchel leaning against her knee. She measured and mixed them into an empty bottle, stirring with a glass rod. "Give your ma'aram two spoons at dawn, noon and nightfall until its gone. When it's gone she can go back to work," Tamlestari added, meeting Becca's eyes. "I know you're short handed, but you can hold out until then, right?"

Becca nodded. She left the rooms beside the Sharani youth. "I didn't like you at all this morning," she said. "But I'm starting to now."

Tamlestari's lips twisted into an impish grin. "Same here. But don't expect much. Sometimes I just can't help myself."

"I'll remember. Josh is having some odd problems, now that I think on it."

"Like what?" Tamlestari stopped, turning to Becca with an interested expression, but Becca only shook her head.

"You can check for mage gift?"

"A bit. I'm not really skilled at it. Most Readers can't, but I can."

"Then Josh won't let you within reach of him."

"Why?"

"No one knows. Unless it's Clemmerick. They're best friends. Or the Kwaklahmyn shaman, Branch. Branch has protected Josh since the mon was a child. Branch knows everything that goes on along the Northwest Coast, the dark and the light."

\* \* \* \*

Narrow two and three story houses set wall against wall like huddled orphans, made bright with a patchwork of hanging plants lined the first street. At the street's end the docks and wharves opened up. Stevedores bustled about the ships, many of them stripped to the waist in the unseasonable heat, loading and unloading. A carpenter's mate went past with his stained leather apron and belt of tools. Along the curving shoreline a distance from the wharves, fishing nets dried in the sun beside the boats drawn up on the shore in a pattern of weathered gray and brown against the golden sands. Fishermyn moved among them patching and tending, removing bits of debris that might later cause problems. Beyond the shore the sea stretched out like a liquid infinity, going on forever.

Brendorn drew a sharp awed breath, and then lifted his eyes to the tall masted sailing ships. "Like castles on the water!"

Aejys smiled, took out her pipe, and filled it. "You think that one's big?" She gestured with the pipe, "You should see mine."

"Can we go on it?" Brendorn asked eagerly.

"That's what we're down here for. They have finished the main cabins. The furniture is in. Architect wanted my approval."

The people they passed stopped in their work and greeted Aejys as she went by. Brendorn stayed close, looking a bit uncertain under all the attention so different from the polite deferment the Sharani showed their upper classes.

"Why do they all speak?"

"For the same reason they want me for mayor. I guess. Just after the spring thaw, Vorgensburg got raided by pirates out of Brunstrat. They blocked the port. Came in in longboats. By the time the guard got organized my household and I were already turning them. The raiders definitely did not expect anything like Clemmerick."

"Clemmerick?"

"The ogre who takes care of my stables. He's not full blood or full size, his father's human, but he makes a good substitute catapult in a pinch," Aejys paused to relight her pipe. "As well as wielding a mean pike."

"You are collecting misfits again," Brendorn said softly, with approval in his tone. He slipped his arm around her waist and pressed against her.

"I don't know about that." She smiled back and kissed the tip of his nose, stroked the points of his ears. "To my mind, Brendorn, there is no such thing as a misfit, just people who have not found their place in the world."

"Like a half-breed gardener?"

"I thought you had found your place..."

"Only when I am with you."

Aejys shook herself loose, starting on again. "You still taking care of Kaethreyn's gardens?"

Brendorn shook his head. "No. She has given me my own gardens, private ones. I think she meant to comfort me when you left..."

Aejys nodded thoughtfully, "Ma'aram would do that. Treat you like I made a grass-widow of you when I ran off."

"It did comfort me. And Ladonys and Laeoli also. You should see them and our gardens."

"I intend to. Do you have a bench in your garden?"

Brendorn nodded. "And a table."

"We will try to get there before winter sets in. I want to sit there with you and smell the flowers you have nurtured." Impulsively, Aejs reached around him to draw the sword he carried at his side. Brendorn lifted his arms to let her take it. She felt the weight and balance. It was a good blade. "You ever learn to use this?"

"A little. Ladonys finally gave up on me. She says I'm hopeless. I'm a gardener, Aejs, never going to be anything else."

\* \* \* \*

"There she is." Aejs stopped and pointed. "The Seafox. It's based on a triton design. The amphibians know more about sailing than land people. Or so Josh tells me. He also says the tritons don't use oars, but the shipwright wasn't happy without them."

Brendorn looked up, he had been so lost in thought and conversation that he had not even realized they were approaching a ship. "She is beautiful, Aejs. Very beautiful."

The Seafox was three masted, double-ended with a double row of oars. She carried a crew of 35, four officers and had room for just over a dozen passengers or soldiers. A gangplank extended to the quay and a stout man stood at the foot of it with a roll of parchments under his arm. They toured the ship, coming at last to Aejs' cabin. There she dismissed the architect.

The cabin was wide. Carpets covered the floor. A broad double bed lay to the right of the door covered by a thick gold velvet bedspread and piled with pillows of all descriptions. A well-stocked desk stood to the left. Aejs drew Brendorn to the huge bed, unbuckling his belt while she pushed him down onto the thick satin bedspread. "My love, I have an itch that has not been scratched in years."

\* \* \* \*

They walked home in the dark, arm in arm. Lights winked out in the shops and homes as they passed, the streets going still and sleepy. The night watch stopped them, recognized Aejs immediately and offered to see them safely home. Aejs declined and they went on. A light still shone in some of the Cock and Boar's upper story and the kitchen, but the common room was dark. At the northeast corner of the compound the stable was brightly lit.

They entered unnoticed through the postern door. Targets had been mounted on bales of hay set up at the far end, away from the animals. Becca slid a stone into a sling, whirled it thrice, and let fly. She continued until she emptied her pouch, never missing.

Clemmerick, sitting amid the hay bales with his back to the wall, applauded her, roaring approval.

"Where did you learn that?" Aejs asked.

Becca gave her a cocky smile. "Father was a farmer. We learned young to shy a stone at the birds that got into the crops. Got so the birds didn't come around much once I killed a couple each season."

The tavern master began retrieving her stones. Aejs walked to the targets and picked one up. The stone was a smooth deep red with blue and green veins. "Where do you find these?"

"Not around here. Those are my lucky stones. I found them in the river beds around Cherdon'datar."

"Your father is a centaur?"

Becca frowned, swallowed an irritated non sequitur, "No. There are humans in Cherdon'datar as well as centaurs. My family farms at the Three Points where the rivers meet."

"You are a long way from home, Becca."

Becca gave her a wry look. "Aren't we all?"

"Becca, before I forget, is that serving woman doing any better?"

"Not really. Her daughter tells me she's coughing so bad at night she can hardly sleep."

Aejs nodded thoughtfully. "Have a healer look in on her at my expense. Take care of our people, Becca."

"I have," she replied. "Tamlestari treated a few hours ago. She'll be better soon."

"Tamlestari?"

"She's very good," Becca replied.

Brendorn nodded agreement. "She's a surgeon as well as ha'taren."

Aejys considered that a moment, remarking, "A rare combination."

\* \* \* \*

"Margren was the reason you left, wasn't she?" Brendorn said as Aejys rolled off him and they lay together in the warm afterglow of love.

"Part. Yes." Aejys turned away, pulling the sheets around her heavily scarred body. "I'd rather not talk about it."

"I know." Brendorn moved closer, his hand gently closing on her right shoulder, which bore a criss-cross pattern of scars. "But there is a time and a season to all things. Ladonys, Laeoli, and I ... we felt hurt when you left. We tried hard to understand. You were so badly wounded from... from..." Brendorn realized he couldn't say it any more than Aejys could. "What happened taking Bucharsa Temple."

"I'm sorry," Aejys rolled back to face him. "I'm truly sorry. I thought you would be safer in Rowan Castle. I didn't know where I was going or what I was doing. I just had to get out of there."

"We weren't safe." The calm patience in his voice made her wince.

"I meant to send for you as soon as I got settled in Vorgensburg. As soon as I had a place to bring you." She knew that sounded lame the moment she said it for she had had a place for nearly two years. A drawer filled to overflowing with unsent letters to him bore mute testimony to her intentions but she could not bring herself to mention them.

"What did Margren do?" Brendorn went straight for the point.

Aejys sat up, reaching for her pipe on the nightstand. The sheets settled down around her waist and lap. She filled the pipe, tamped it down, and lit it. She sat sucking on it for several moments. The candlelight, wavering in a breeze that slid in around the open window shutters, cast strange patterns of light and shadow across her scar-mottled body.

"Just before the invasion of Waejontor. When the levies were gathering at Rowan Castle. Ma'aram begged me to promise I would never harm Margren in any way. I made that vow. 'My life be forfeit to God if I break it'," Aejys quoted the final words of the most solemn promise a ha'taren could make. "After Bucharsa, Margren came to me privately. When she finished I knew I couldn't keep that vow."

Brendorn's expression turned bleak. "I should not have come."

"You had no more choice than I did – do." Aejys' mouth pulled into a thin line. She

re-filled her pipe and drew on it contemplatively for several moments before realizing she hadn't lit it. "It was an impossible situation. If I break that vow, not only am I dishonored, but also I break Kaethreyn's heart. I love my ma'aram."

"I know," Brendorn acknowledged. "But she isn't always easy to live with."

Aejys gave him a long sad look. "And if I keep it... There's no doubt in my mind... Margren will kill me." Anger flared white hot and she cursed, "If I could have defended myself I would have stayed and fought. But my hands were tied. I wasn't going to stay there like some bloody lamb waiting to be butchered."

Brendorn looked deeply shaken. "So you ran."

Aejys exhaled and nodded. "I thought – hoped if I could erase my fame by crawling through the mud and sewers – that Margren would be satisfied. That she would leave me alone."

"She was. Until you killed the great wyrm. You will always be the Lion of Rowanslea. She cannot endure that."

"I ran out of funds. After seven years, with six kingdoms between me and Shaurone, I had stopped thinking about Margren. I just felt free. It was good until now. It was a mistake." Aejys pressed her hands to her face, her fingers framing her eyes and sighed, "If I survive my encounter with Farendarc, then I will probably die in Castle Rowan bringing Laeoli out."

"Don't say that. You can't know it."

"Brendorn, I never lie to myself. There are things I choose not to think about and things I choose not to talk about. And there are things I know to the very fiber of my being which I wish I didn't. But I never lie to myself. There is no way that I can go back and not break that vow. Somehow, somewhere." Aejys snorted. "Maybe I'll even want to when I get there."

"Then let us not think about it." Brendorn took the pipe from her hands, placing it on the nightstand. He kissed her with a desperate hunger, painfully aware of how ultimately fragile life was. She pressed his hands to her breasts and lay back, pulling him down on top of her. Passion banished the dark thoughts from Aejys' mind.

\* \* \* \*

Mephistis leaned against the mantel above the fireplace with his tall Sharani boot against the fender, letting the warmth rise against him. He favored the Sharani style, comfortable and practical. It was already starting to cool along the cliffs of Dragonshead. The sa'necari prince of Waejontor watched Isranon setting out dinner on a round central table. Mephistis allowed his fangs to descend, running his tongue across them.

The sa'necari necromancers had assumed all the powers and appetites of the undead, adding it to their own native mage powers. In the beginning they had assumed them by rites, but eventually the older lineages began to be born sa'necari for the rites had altered their genes over the successive generations. A branch of crimson candles illuminated the chamber. His sworn mon rarely took blood, preferring actual food. Isranon was the last Dark Brother of the Light, a sa'necari born possessed of a strange ethos, which was why Mephistis trusted him, and him alone, implicitly.

"You don't like Margren, Isranon." He had asked it before, but despite his fondness for the youth, he could not completely restrain himself from toying with him. Isranon hated having been born sa'necari, and the fact that Margren had chosen to become sa'necari through the rites appalled him. Mephistis could see that in Isranon's manner.

Isranon went still for an instant and then resumed setting the table. "I did not say that."

He was a fine looking seventeen year old, already getting substantial breadth through his shoulders, which suggested he would eventually mature into a powerfully built mon. Mephistis knew that other sa'necari noticed him, the burnished shine of his skin and the heavy curling black hair that the youth caught casually at his neck. It was impossible not to. The sa'necari were an arrogant lot, but there was no arrogance to Isranon, just a simple stubborn pride. He held to himself, spoke to none, and went about his business, yet he stole the notice from the others.

Isranon refused to meet his eyes, head high and staring past him, getting that hard, stubborn edge, all pride and stiffness. Because he had never participated in the rites his powers had never grown beyond that of one barely into the first stages of puberty. Instead he carried a long sword and a pair of long belt knives.

Mephistis crossed and caught the youth's chin, forcing his face around until he was forced to meet the prince's eyes. "I see it in your eyes."

The prince had stumbled upon the youth and his sister, who was now dead, three years ago. He remembered the boy, then barely past fourteen breaking from cover ahead of him, pursued by a pack of sa'necari. On a whim, Mephistis had seized Isranon and thrown him across his saddle. He had mistaken him for a lycan because of the way the youth was dressed and the fact that they were on the edges of the lycan chieftain Claw Redhand's valley. Mephistis liked to stay on good terms with Claw since he purchased horses and other things from the chieftain, and thought he was merely rescuing one of Claw's people from some sa'necari with a taste for lycan blood. His senses had quickly told him different. The youth was sa'necari and that intrigued him instantly. The youth was a heretic and Claw had been sheltering him. Isranon had sworn fealty to Mephistis out of gratitude.



"You would be an easy kill, Isranon. You will tell me if one of them harasses you. Tell me that oath of yours again."

Isranon winced. "The Darkness hunts us and the Light does not want us. Better to step willingly into the fires than to live undead. Better to die with honor than to take a life in the rites. Let each mon go to his own path, but these are ours. And these will always be ours, for this is what we were born to. This is the path the gods have given us, for we are the Dark Brothers of the Light. We are the walking dead who live, for our lives were forfeit with our birth. Forfeit twice over for our choice to live as myn, not monsters, though we are forced to dwell among the monsters. Set yourself apart in your words, in your deeds, in your silence – always in your silence, for silence is your castle. Be as still as the deer in the forest, and if you are fortunate the predators will not notice you. For when they notice you, they will eat you."

"No wonder my people killed you all. Well, you are under my protection."

Isranon nodded. "I am grateful, my prince," he said, his voice softening a little.

Mephistis released his chin, satisfied. "Now go on. Margren and the others will arrive soon."

\* \* \* \*

Isranon stepped into the dusty corridor just as Margren approached with her na'halaef, Juldrid, in tow. Margren's crimson robe, sashed at her hips in black, heightened the ruddy undertones of her dark skin. She moved with an aggressive arrogance, knowing that only Mephistis could call her to account in his citadel, and never allowing anyone here to forget it for a moment. Isranon wished he could have departed sooner from his prince's presence and thereby avoided Margren. Everything about her set Isranon on edge.

Juldrid, a minstrel before she married Margren, carried her lute at her shoulder in a fine case and walked with her eyes on the floor. She stole uneasy glances from the corners of her eyes, wrapped in a pensive air with her shoulders folded. Juldrid shrank back, half pressing against the wall as if desirous of vanishing into the stone if such were possible when Margren paused to rake Isranon with a glance.

Margren circled him like a cat. "Running away again, half-a-mon who will not step into the dark?"

Isranon went still. He would not bend to her, nor be drawn into her games. The youth reached for the refuge of his people's teachings and closed her out by retreating into the silences.

"Margren, please," Juldrid pleaded softly, sounding torn between fear of turning Margren's anger on herself and not wanting to watch this. She edged past Margren.

"When the rites are complete, half-a-mon," Margren hissed at Isranon. "I will eat you."

Isranon still did not reply to her words. He had lived his entire life in the belief that one day the sa'necari would eat him or ride him into death in the rite of sex and magic called mortgiefan. And he'd made his peace with that.

"Isranon!" Dane Jayce came up to them. Dane was lanky to the point of seeming all legs and arms at times. He was a vampire of one of the lineages called the royals because of their immunity to sunlight and possession of strange abilities beyond those of the lesser bloods. "My lady." Dane gave Margren a curt bow.

Margren threw Dane a contemptuous glare and swept on, taking Juldrid with her.

Isranon started on and Dane fell into step beside him. He liked the vampire better than the sa'necari and suspected that Mephistis encouraged Dane to seek him out. Although it could scarcely be called a friendship, owing to Isranon's general distaste for the creatures of the hellgods, he was reasonably comfortable with Dane.

There were only a handful of vampires there and the other sa'necari frequently objected to their presence: vampires and the sa'necari being rivals in power. Dane's group had shown up a few months ago and stayed. Mephistis knew them. They were explorers or researchers of some kind, Isranon had no real idea which and no desire to find out more. He kept himself as isolated as much as possible, building a castle in his mind to close out the things he was forced to witness around him. He could deal with it all so long as he did not allow himself to think about it too closely.

"Where are you going?"

"Onto the bluffs to practice and play my flute." Isranon watched Dane's face for a reaction to the last part of his statement. It was a well-known fact that Sa'necari did not like the music of flutes – if Mephistis had told Dane what Isranon was, he should react with surprise.

"May I accompany you?"

"If you wish." Isranon was disappointed with the lack of response, but felt more and more certain that Mephistis had asked Dane to watch out for him. That might even have played a part in his prince's forcing him to speak again the oath of his fathers'. To remind the youth of his fragility compared to the other monsters and thereby more accepting of Dane's implied protection in Mephistis' absence.

## CHAPTER TWO. FIRST BLOOD

Aejys woke early the morning after her friends' arrival, shaking hard, chilled, and sweating. Troubling dreams had stolen the rest from her sleep. Each dream had been

different, she felt certain, but she could only remember one of them: running through Castle Rowan, empty of everyone save herself; she opened door after door after door and found no one. Mocking laughter led her to one final door. She opened it and there stood her sister, Margren, with a bloody sword in her hand. But not Margren as she had last seen her, haughty and proud, full of hate and anger; it was her sister as a child of seven, sweet-faced and innocent – the child that Aeijys had loved so intensely it bordered on worship and whom she believed would always love her back. "It's all better now. I fixed it," Margren told her, beaming sweetly at her older sister. Then Aeijys snapped awake.

She gazed down at the sleeping Brendorn, resisting an urge to kiss him or stroke his curly head. Her chest tightened with a wave of aching melancholy. Aeijys had not realized how much the unresolved issues of her life had troubled her until unforeseen circumstance brought her face to face with them. It had always been easier and expedient not to dwell on them, to file the bothersome emotional issues away in a dusty corner of her heart, and then get on with living her life. That pattern had worked well during the war years. But it was all self-deception and all the while she prided herself on her ability to be clear and honest with herself.

She needed to rethink her life, but peering beneath the lid of the troubles-box tightened her chest and made her sweat. For a moment she recognized true terror in her heart, and then shame rose and closed the lid. Her mind cleared again as her breathing eased. "Why?" She asked herself, "Why?" Why should the problems of my heart be so much more terrifying than the horrors of the war? She had faced violence and death without flinching, yet the sweetest memories hurt so deeply that she fled them.

Aeijys sat there trying to find some way to climb out of her mind, struggling to break out of the painful circling of her memories. If she did not do something now, she would never find the strength to do it at all.

And she wondered if she was just banging her head against an unyielding wall to even consider them now. Perhaps there were alternatives that she couldn't yet see. And each question built into a cacophony of maddening noise, rising into a scream she could not release. "Iiiii," she moaned, digging her fingers into her hair and pulling gently at the roots. "There's so much noise in my head I can't think in a straight line."

Then her eyes turned back to her sleeping lovemate. "I love you, Brendorn," she murmured softly. "I was a fool not to bring my family with me when I left. A fool—"

She remembered a place she had passed years ago where she might find wise council. A little shrine to the God Aroana, whose paladin she had been before the nightmare at Bucharsa Temple. Maybe it was time to start putting her life back in order, to pick up and face the abandoned threads she had left behind in Shaurone. To reweave them if that was still possible – if there was time. She had been so exhausted, spiritually and physically, when she fled her home seven years ago,

leaving behind her mates and their child. She had still been ill and weak from her wounds taken at Bucharsa temple, closer to death than to life, when she forced Tag to help her escape, fleeing in the dead of night in a gypsy wagon with an escort of Red Ravens, members of the Assassins Guild who owed Tag favors. Perhaps there had been another way. And perhaps there had not. She would never know for certain.

The wandering years had been difficult, but the jewels and gold Tagalong had sealed into the saddles and the harness of the pack animals had kept them through the first years. It had given her time to stop thinking. Those years were a directionless blur. Her only desire, when she did any conscious thinking, was to become someone else, someone Margren would see no threat in. Then Margren became a blur. Aejys stopped thinking about her, even intermittently. Life started to be comfortable again or was it the first time? Aejys was no longer certain.

Vorgensburg had been good to her. She enjoyed owning the tavern and the inn, drinking and talking and sharing stories with her patrons and guests. She enjoyed walking the quays and beaches or going up the coast by boat or taking the Northwest Road on horseback to trade with the Kwaklahmyn tribes. She treasured the absence of the high expectations she had grown up with; the lesser responsibilities; the opportunity to just be Aejys, not the Lion of Rowanslea. Parts of her, which she had not realized were wounded, had healed.

But she had also slipped unconsciously into some of her old patterns, building a household and taking allegiances, expanding into trade and building ships, considering establishing an estate in the wilderness between Vorgensburg and the Kwaklahmyn lands. Gradually accepting more and more responsibility for other people, those who had become her people. And now the old life had returned to get her as if it realized that now she could not say no. She had to face the things she had refused to face. It was time to go back ... if she survived the duel. And it was time to find out why her god had abandoned her. To find out what terrible sin she had unknowingly committed that had taken the heart out of her faith.

She slipped from the bed without waking him, dressed quietly, strapped on her daggers and sword. Aejys crossed the room to her private liquor cabinet and took out her last two bottles of a rare Faery brewed wine, the best vintage she owned. Tucking the bottles under her arm she eased out into the antechamber. She started for the door, and then hesitated at her writing desk. She pulled out a piece of paper and wrote a quick note for Tagalong so someone would know where she had gone in case of trouble. Then she walked down the hall, slid it under Tagalong's door, and went to the stables.

Gwyndar whinnied questioningly "Where are we going so early?"

The big sorrel equine was a wynderjyn; get of a unicorn sire and a horse mare. He stood eighteen hands at the shoulder, black-maned and haughty. Two other

wynderjyn had box stalls nearby, Cassana Odaren's chestnut Ajandar and Tamlestari's blue roan Emrindi. Sharani priests of Aroana bred them in sheltered northeastern valleys of the Mar'ajante of Rowanslea. The temple trained daughters of the aristocracy, those who wished to become ha'taren – paladins – bonded with them, sometimes in very early childhood during a summer of prayer in a sacred valley. To be rejected by the wynderjyn often meant being dismissed from school and sent home as unsuitable for further training. The wynderjyns rejected Margren. Their unicorn sire drove Margren from their meadows whenever she ventured out. And for reasons Aejs could never comprehend, Margren had always blamed her for that.

Aejys entered the stall and stroked his heavy dark mane, scratching around his handspan's length of horn. "Remember that small shrine to Aroana?"

"The one near the falls?"

"Yes," She shoved the wine into her saddlebags. "I haven't made an offering or prayed in years. I think it's high time I started acting like ha'taren again – at least a little bit."

"I think so too."

Then she smelled the vomit and whiskey. "Josh spent the night here again? Where is he?"

"Walking the beach. Then he'll go to Branch's. The Shaman will watch him."

"Good."

\* \* \* \*

The common room bustled with early morning activity as the hired help prepared for the breakfast customers. Zacham, the scullery boy, his wealth of shiny black hair tousled and mixed with straw from sleeping in the stable loft, shoved a broom that was taller than he was through the common room. He nodded, grinning broadly at Tagalong as the dwarf settled into a chair and drew her feet up.

"Ma'am!"

"Good mornin', kid," muttered Tagalong and flashed him a perfunctory smile before her mouth returned to a glower. She wore her riding leathers and a deep-sleeved blue shirt beneath the jerkin. Her sword rose from her shoulder sheath: she rarely resorted to the blade, preferring the hammer she carried thrust through her belt. A beaded band partially captured her thick, unruly crimson hair, which flared around her plain broad face like a fiery halo. She watched the stairs slapping Aejs' note against her hand. Something was up. Tagalong could feel it in her bones. And Aejs hadn't looked near as happy about having Brendorn back as Tagalong had expected. "No

sirree! Ya'r not keepin' me outta this one, Aejys," she muttered to herself.

"Is something eating you, Tag?" Becca inquired, setting a tray of eggs and potatoes, a plate of cheddared duck, curried capons, and a bowl of honeyed oatmeal, swimming with butter in front of her.

Tagalong shook her head at the food, eliciting an askance glance from Becca who knew the dwarf's enormous appetite. "Who's still here? I know Aejys ain't."

"The Ajan Odaren and Tamlestari left about an hour ago to watch at the gates," Becca told her. "Brendorn has not come down yet."

"There's trouble, Becca. I don't know what it is, but I'm about to find out," Tagalong told her grimly.

"For Aejys?" The light of suspicion grew in the tavern master's eyes while the rest of her face lost expression.

"Yah. I'm beginnin' ta think this wasn't no social call." Shoulda known that when I saw'em.

"What can I do?"

"Keep yer eyes open."

"I'll keep my eyes open, Tag, but understand I'm short handed right now."

"Speak of a demon," Tagalong muttered, seeing Brendorn start down the stairs. She sprang from her chair, charging up to him. Her open palm met the half-breed's midsection firmly but not aggressively. Her expression turned savage as she waved the letter in his face. "Ya've got some serious explainin', Brendorn Amaranth of Vallimrah!" Her accent thickened with anger as she pointedly used his Valdren name to imply she felt his connection with Aejys was broken. "Serious explainin'!"

Brendorn, who had lingered late into the morning just to touch everything in the room to savor the places her hands had been and the smell of her in the sheets, caught the letter as it brushed his nose. For just an instant both of them held the folded square, then Tagalong Smith released it. He read quickly. "I don't know what you are upset about. She has just gone to a shrine," he said, a look of relief in his eyes.

"She hasn't been in a shrine or temple in seven years," Tagalong punctuated each word by tapping him in the mid-section. By the time she started the second sentence Brendorn had begun to wince and by the third to almost flinch. "Not since before Bucharsa. What's got'er roiled enough ta go ta one now? Unless it's something ya said. Ya put a tack in her chair and yer gonna tell me what it was. Ya understand me, Breed!" Tagalong snarled and bits of spittle flew from her mouth, some of it striking

the sylvan's face.

Brendorn recoiled, his expression pained. He had never seen her so enraged before, especially at him. Her anger frightened him for he was, after all, just a simple gardener. Tagalong had, by choice, spent most of her childhood wandering the Sharani ghettos, tagging along after anyone or anything that interested her or aroused her curiosity, which had gained her her name, and she had fought her way through the worse war in five hundred years at Aejs' side. All the sylvan quickness in the world would not stop her from giving him a severe pounding if that was what she intended. But even more, Brendorn had always experienced difficulty dealing with the anger of those he loved when it was directed at him. He started to flee, but Tagalong caught him by the tunic.

"Just becuz ya don't like the talk don't mean ya can rabbit on me."

Brendorn froze, closing his eyes, an unspoken prayer on his lips that she would release him, but Tagalong hung onto him until he opened them again. He looked down at the stout dwarf, who though shorter than he, outweighed him a good fifty pounds. Distress filled his face. "Tag, please, this isn't your business. It's her place to tell you, if she wants to. Not mine."

"Aejys has been my business since before ya ever laid eyes on her," Tagalong pointed out stubbornly, her mouth tight and eyes narrowing. She twisted his shirt into a knot and lifted him off his toes. "Paladins make screwy decisions, even lapsed ones, and don't always call fer backup when they need it... I gotta a gut feeling ya've just put Aejs' life on the line again and I wanta know fer what."

Brendorn drew a deep breath and surrendered. "So be it, show me your rooms and we will talk there in private. It isn't my story to tell you, but I will. I am certain Aejs will understand."

"Yah, I'm sure she will."

\* \* \* \*

Tagalong's antechamber looked much like the front room of a Kwaklahmyn lodge. They sat on brightly patterned floor pillows around a stout, legless hardwood table which she had purchased from the Kwaklahmyn when she and Aejs had gone up to attend a potlatch given by Thomas Cedarbird's paternal kin. Tagalong was totally impressed with their arts and crafts. Cedar blankets hung as decorations on her walls alongside a pair of crossed harpoons with whalebone tips. A four character totem pole which the local shaman, Broken Branch, designed for Tagalong dominated the northwest corner; earth dragon, cave bear, raven, manticore.

When Tagalong had heard his story, she slapped the table, "Answer's easy. The best thing would be to just go in, grab her daughter and leave, side-stepping all the bullshit."

Tag fondled her hammer idly as she spoke, adding more to herself than Brendorn, "Very best would be to lock her in the cellar, throw away the key and leave without her. But she'd be hotter than hell when she got out an' be my ass she'd be after." Tagalong lapsed silent for a minute, then picked up her initial trail of thought again. "Try'n ignore Margren and when pressed arrange ta never let her be alone with her sister. Never leave Aejs alone, period. Just never give Margren an opportunity ta put her in an inescapable position. And then get out as quickly as we can. Kaethreyn just wants a chance to try'n talk Aejs into staying home. Look, Brendorn, I got family in Iradrim, I got family in a dozen places we could get to easy. Places we could winter where Margren couldn't reach. So stop worrying. Leave it all to me and nothin' will happen to Aejs. Okay?"

Brendorn nodded, forcing a smile. "You always find a way, don't you, Tag?"

"Yeah, I do. So we let Aejs think she's in charge, but we both know it's me."

\* \* \* \*

Spruce and fir stretched their sovereign green through the rainshadow east of Vorgensburg, then gave way to the dominance of white fir and willow as the land rolled down into the deeply recessed water hollows stretching like dark fingers toward the south. Aejs dismounted in a willow thicket by a tiny sheltered stream. She could hear the waterfall crashing into the stream beyond the willows. Gwyndar followed. Aejs pushed through the willows, careful to do no harm to them, as they were sacred to Aroana.

Strange foreign pantheons of Gods of Light were awakened and drawn to the world of Daverana by the call of the last surviving god of the previous pantheon of light as a holocaust destroyed it. When they began to cleanse and rebuild it, they each brought gifts from other worlds. Aroana brought the willow tree, the tree that wept, as a symbol of her grief at the destruction and loss of life among the elder races of that world. The willows growing around a shrine were considered doubly holy because the priests consecrated them to the God. The doorframe and edges of the roof were thickly adorned with seasonally discarded deer horns. The wild deer came and left them there each year in remembrance of the early days of the New Creation when gigantic stags defended Aroana's shrines, her children, and the helpless that came to her for succor.

Aejs hesitated at the door, intense feelings of shame and guilt filled her for turning her back on the vows, which had framed her sense of honor and fairness since her earliest days, forming the foundation of her life from as far back as she could remember. All the determination she had started out with faded. Her aching need to make peace with her god remained, but fear of what her unknown sin had been, knowing to what degree she had not lived the life since Bucharsa, filled her with trepidation. She felt as though she had come clothed in mud instead of cloth.



Once the tenants of Aroana had filled every crook and cranny of her life, shaped every turn and corner. She had always felt that no matter how bad things got she could always pray and Aroana would listen. In Aroana's name Aeijys had experienced miracles that marked her as one of the god's chosen. Then her faith died at Bucharsa when she cried out in her pain and distress and no answer came from her god. Since god had turned her back on Aeijys, Aeijys turned her back on god. And yet, in the dusty corners of her heart and soul, she still longed to be wrong, to find that Aroana still wanted her. That now, in her time of need, she could be forgiven for seven god-forsaking years.

The door opened and the slender figure of the priest stood forth. She was a small dark woman with a face too narrow and long for her otherwise modest nose. Her large black eyes, warm and compassionate, seemed almost too large for her face. She extended her long-fingered hands and clasped Aeijys' arm.

"I have been expecting you since yesterday, Aeijystrys Rowan. I am Suthana Willowheart, priest to this shrine."

Aeijys sighed heavily, struggling to release all her troubled feelings and doubt. "Ma'aram Suthana, I have come..."

"Peace," she said, touching Aeijys' mouth lightly. "I know why you have come. You need not speak if it pains you. Like many warriors, you did not know you were wounded here," she patted Aeijys' chest with the tips of her fingers, "until long years after the battle was fought. You must learn to lean into the sharp points if you would have those wounds heal."

"You're an oracle?"

Suthana smiled gently. "The priest of this shrine is always an oracle. Do you know not which shrine this is?"

Aeijys glanced around, trying to remember her lore and failing. She shook her head. "No."

"This is the Willow Horn."

Aeijys dropped trembling to her knees. Where Aroana emerged from the Ethereal Void and planted the first willow! Her stomach seized up painfully. She folded her arms and leaned over them, pressing them into her stomach. Holy Ground. Holy of Holies. I should never have come here. I am unclean. Unclean. A need to weep and confess every transgression of the last years warred with her need to be in control of herself.

Suthana knelt and wrapped her arms around Aeijys. "Let go, Aeijys Rowan. Let yourself heal."

The priest's arms felt warm. Aejs drank in their comfort like a man dying of thirst that suddenly stumbles on an oasis. She sucked in deep breaths to still her trembling.

"You have committed no major transgressions against your liege-god and honor. Just a sea of little ones." Suthana raised her up and drew her to the altar.

Aejys shrugged her left shoulder. The saddlebag slid off and down her arm. She took the two bottles out. Suthana removed the saddlebags, setting them outside the sacred altar circle.

"She abandoned me," Aejs spoke softly with a small catch in her voice that her best efforts could not stifle. "At first I thought I must have offended Her. But I could not think how. Unless there was some evil in me that I could not see. Then I became angry and turned my back on Her. Finally I just stopped thinking about it or her at all."

"When?" Suthana prodded gently. "Lean into the sharp points and tell me when you first felt abandoned."

"She wasn't with me in Bucharsa Temple – when I needed Her." Aejs shuddered as the memory came flashing back through her with incredible intensity. "Near the War's end I got cut up bad. By rights I probably should have died. I broke into a Waejontori temple, got separated from my troops in the maze..."

Aejys hesitated.

The smell of burning flesh. The clang of weapons and cries of the wounded and dying. The silence when she realized her heedless charge had outdistanced her guard. Turning a corner. The iron grip of a stone troll seizing her from behind. The swish of sa'necari adepts' robes. She could feel the terror of what came next in her bones. Recoiling from it, a tremor shook her and the breath seemed to seize up in her lungs while rocks gathered in her stomach.

"Damn. Damn. Damn." Terror and shame roared up and suddenly she was on her feet, running for the door. She plunged from the temple, staggered six steps, and fell to her knees, clutching her stomach and vomiting into the moss at the base of the largest willow.

Suthana followed silently. The priest knelt, supporting Aejs' trembling shoulders as the former paladin retched. Finally it was over. Suthana helped her to rise and they walked only a few steps before Aejs sank again to her knees, her hands clutched tightly together. Suthana's hand covered the lapsed paladin's and her touch brought her back. Aejs drew a series of measured breaths and straightened making no move yet to rise. "I'm okay..."

"Are you certain?"

Aejys nodded. "Sa'necari and trolls captured me. Took me deep into the labyrinth. Past secret doors sealed by magic." Cold stone altar. Intense faces gathered around her. Rumble of stone trolls. Banewitch-adepts and sa'necari chanting. Cold burning blades slicing her. Unclean death. Unclean. Unclean. Aejys realized she was close to losing it again. She forced air into her lungs, mastering herself. "Do you know what a baneblade is?"

"Tell me," Suthana bade gently, although clearly she already knew the answer.

"It doesn't just cut your body. It flays your soul. You come back. Undead. Their slave. The longer it takes you to die from them the more powerful an undead you are. The more powerful a servant." Aejys paused. She had started down this path and would go all the way. So she stood up and slipped off her pants. The pattern of scars showed on her thighs as well as her calves.

Suthana winced, her breath catching in her chest in spite of herself. She sketched the Aroanan rune in the air before her.

Aejys pulled her pants up. "As ha'taren, a paladin of Aroana ... I would have made a very powerful banelich, a slave of the blade." Aejys named the thing that most terrified her: the thought of becoming – herself – one of the monsters feeding on her people; her soul trapped possibly forever because of one headlong, heedless act. "They had finished with my legs and started on my arms when Tag blew a hole in the wall and ceiling with Iradrim Fire. My soldiers poured in. Most people die of one cut from those things. Don't know why I didn't. But I was six months in bed and another six getting my strength back. I had plenty of time to think and weigh things. Aroana was not there for me."

"Was She not?" Suthana sounded surprised. "One cut of a baneblade is death and undeath. You were ritually cut dozens of times on that altar, yet you live. And I feel no taint of undeath lingering on your soul. When your time comes you will die clean, your soul will go free. Can you not see Her hand in that?"

Abruptly Aejys drew a deep easy breath. Her whole body relaxed and Aejys felt almost dizzy as though heavy stones had been lifted from her heart and chest. She had not unknowingly offended Aroana. The God had not forsaken her. "Light of Justice, forgive me..."

She allowed Suthana to draw her back into the temple. Then she remembered her offering. She extended one bottle to Suthana as the priest's portion. Aejys knelt and began to speak, in the Sharani tongue, the words of the ritual of offering. When she faltered and struggled for the long forgotten words Suthana softly whispered them to her. As she continued more and more of the ritual prayers returned to her: Aejys grew calm and strong again. Toward the middle the words came flooding back. She felt as though the last years had not happened and her younger self knelt before the altar with truth and faith in every word. When she finished, she opened the wine and

poured in out onto the earth around the statue of the God Aroana. The statue showed a tall, strong woman with battle-ax and shield ready, while a fawn and a genderless child huddled behind her for protection.

The heady scent of incense filled the chamber. She turned to face the priest who had taken the seat of oracle beside the altar, casting the Incense of Seeing into the flames of a large brazier. Aejs knelt again, facing the priest now.

Suthana's eyes were closed. Her lips parted and a voice, not Suthana's, one Aejs had not heard in many years came from Suthana's lips.

"You have been long away from me. I counted you among my favorites. I would have you back. You ride with death at your heels, before you and behind you."

Aejs wanted to return so desperately it made her sick, and yet fear swelled up into her throat, her stomach tightened. Bucharsa was burning in her mind, behind her eyes, what peace she gained in the words of ritual burned away like dew before the sun. A scream formed within her. She forced it down, forced the words out in a twisted croak, "I want to return ... I want to..."

"Then pray to me now."

"I can't! I can't!"

The God's voice turned sad. "I cannot help you until you return fully to me in faith and trust and love. But I will give you this advice: Take a party, five score, hand picked, gray mice, red ravens, and borrowed badgers – and any others who can hold their own and come of their own free will – if you would have hope of reaching your child alive. But mark this well, Aejs's Rowan: far, far more is at stake than just Laeolytyn. The war is not ended, just moved in another direction. A very dangerous one for the realm and people you once swore to defend with your life and honor, spirit and soul, mind and body. One you once knew well has given herself over to the darkness and Shaurone will fall at winter's solstice. You are already caught in this darkness. The evil that reaches out to destroy you, reaches out just as surely to destroy the realm that holds it in check. When Shaurone falls, so falls the world."

Aejs raised her eyes to the god speaking through her priest, feeling stunned and shaken to the core of her being. Once she would have risen to face this darkness, to defend and fight, but her heart quelled with sick dread. "I – I can't. I just can't."

She felt bile rising in her throat again, wanting desperately to run and never stop this time. But she controlled herself with great effort.

"So be it then. But return to me, my ha'taren, in full faith and honor and at your darkest moments I will make a way where there is no way. I will open a door where there are no doors. When you lie down in the garden of death I will awaken you to

life. For now, go and sit beside the waterfall until the sun rises on the morrow. Reflect on your ten years of war and your seven years just passed. Then Suthana can cleanse you, but only with High Priest Sonden at Rowan Castle can you retake your vows if by then you have recovered your nerve and faith ... and wish to return to me."

Suthana sighed and grew still. The God had left her. Aejys rose to her feet and fled staggering to the door and then out, collapsing in a sobbing heap among the mossy willows.

\* \* \* \*

Josh walked the beaches. The straw was too empty with Gwyndar gone, but he would go back there when night fell. Either there or the north cellar, if he did not want to be found. Otherwise, he had a room at the Cock and Boar, or Branch would let him stay at the village. So many places to hide.

He carried a bottle of whiskey in his pocket and he had filled his other pocket up with seashells and a bag at his shoulder with more shells along with his scrimshaw supplies. His scrimshaw was without peer, although before Aejys came along he rarely got paid what it was worth. He had a fine hand and eye when he wasn't shaking with the need for another drink.

Words and names kept dancing through his mind in an intricate spiral of images he could not understand and feared to mention, feared that even Branch would tell him it meant he was evil or mad or possessed or something worse:

Once there were three brothers: Brandrahoon, the demon-vampire; Isranon, called Dawnhand, Speaker to Spirits; and Waejonan the Accursed, first of the sa'necari, forever damned.

It kept repeating through his thoughts. He dropped to his knees and crawled upon the sand. A wave rolled up the beach, its high fringe soaked him, getting sand into his face and gilding his skin and beard with it. Josh spit sand and bits of water, moving higher onto the rocky beach, into the depths of the substantial crevices, but he could not escape the words. They followed him with visions of death, fire, and burning villages. Another wave, crashing higher, hit him, knocking him face down. Sand coated his face. Josh caught the edge of the rock and dragged himself, by feel alone, around it. He tried to force his eyes open fully but could not get them past the thick crust of sand.

Two destroyed one...

Josh screamed and balled up, almost losing his bottle. "Stop talking to me. Shut up, Abelard!"

Then strong hands seized him, lifting him clear of the strand and he thrashed

weakly.

"Josh! Be still, you've got your eyes crusted shut!"

The sot stilled abruptly at the ogre's voice, realizing that the monsters from his alcohol triggered nightmares had not gotten him. Josh felt a rush of simple comfort, followed by a blur of warmth and his frightened desolation faded into a sensation of being a little boy in a parent's arms as he allowed Clemmerick to hold him unresisting. Clemmerick carried him down the strand to Branch's place and Josh heard the bells ring as Clemmerick opened the gates in the tall pole fence.

The ogre knocked on a door. Bluewings, the shaman's granddaughter, let them in and immediately fetched water and soft cloths, and began gently soaking the crusted sand and salt from Josh's eyes. They got some food and water into the wasted mon.

"He was having a vision of some kind, Branch," Clemmerick explained. The ogre, whose mother was a poet and loremaster, took Josh more seriously than the rest of the Vorgeni. "Kept calling a name. Abelard."

Branch shook his head at that. "There are no Abelards left. They are all slain. I knew the last of them."

Clemmerick frowned worriedly. "Could you have mentioned them to him? I know I never have."

"No. Until now, I never mentioned them to anyone. You must not."

Clemmerick considered. "I know the danger accruing to any with that name."

\* \* \* \*

In the curve of a deep overhang in the cliff face whose striking formation earned it the name "Dragonshead" lay the ruins of a castle shattered millennia past by fire and magic. Grey moss clothed its broken walls, filling every chink of the surviving stone work. A scruffy carpet of heather and tussocks of stiff grass covered the ground, growing over and around the litter of rocks and collapsing fragments of brick, punctuated by scrub oak, pine and spiky bushes. Once there had been rowans also, the trees whose branches defended against evil, but a decade past they had been stricken with a strange plague and died.

The ruins of Dragonshead lay less than half a day's march of Rowan Castle in the Sharani mar'ajante of Rowanslea. Most people stayed away from Dragonshead. It was a seat of dark power. Even those unattuned to the presence of magic could sense the terrifying hum and writhing of dark energies beneath the ground. Tradition held that a labyrinth of corridors, rooms, and dungeons lay buried beneath Dragonshead with tremendous treasures for anyone with the courage and cleverness to find the lost doorways. No one knew who had carved out this underground

citadel, for it was older than the castle that once set atop it, older than Shaurone itself, a remnant of those most ancient days when another pantheon of gods fought the Dark One and lost, leaving the world in ruins. None had ever found it. Or so it was generally believed. But they had been found.

Deep in the earth, at the heart of the citadel beneath the ruins, stood a vast dark shrine built for a rite of hecatomb. The chamber, like the entire citadel, was carved from the living stone itself; smooth, seamless and gray. A single altar slab stood at the center on a raised dais, nine slabs on the next tier down radiated around it in a half circle and in a descending series of tiers came a half circle of eighteen, and then twenty seven, and so it continued until the slabs numbered fully one hundred. Bound victims lay on the central altar and the next nine, their bodies stretched tight, wrists and ankles bound across the blood grooves. Their drug-glazed faces showed no signs of understanding what awaited them. In that much there was mercy, but it was not intended as such. The drugs inhibited the victims' powers, for each was a lifemage and touch healer of great talent stolen by force from their homes. Margren had substituted the drugs for spellcords to hold their powers, since she wanted those powers to rise free with their deaths that she might capture them with their souls.

A sonorous chanting filled the chamber, incense heavily layering the air as acolytes marched in slow procession around the altars, waving censers and beating drums. Stonetrolls stood impassively beneath the eaves and one on each end of each tier, guarding them against an intrusion that would not come.

Margren moved to the first one, carrying two daggers in her hands. One she would use in the rite. The other was the unfinished baneblade to be used in only the greatest rites. She laid the silver handled baneblade, thick with runes on the hilt and along the blood groove upon the center of the first victim's body. Then she wielded the second in mystic gestures. A net of black tendrils spread from the rune blade on the mon's stomach. Through his drugged haze he seemed to realize what was happening and strained against his bonds. The effects of the drugs were wearing off faster than Margren had expected; this one was strong, it was fortunate she had chosen to do him first. Then her dagger descended, piercing his heart. He shuddered and lay still. A white glow began along his body, gathering and trying to rise away toward the heavens. The black net caught it and drew it into the blade. Margren smiled, retrieved her daggers, and moved to the next one, a slender blonde mon. She wept as Margren began the rite, and accepted the blade without struggling against it.

One by one Margren took all nine, binding their souls to the blade along with their powers, which the blade would twist to her uses. Then, the baneblade completed, she sheathed it. Finally only a Sharani boy of ten remained, bound to the central altar. Margren paused beside him, tousling his dark hair affectionately, regretfully. "Pity, I couldn't find a substitute for you, you're pretty enough to eat."

He had been a strange child, quietly, almost serenely defiant, vowing that his

ma'aram would destroy them all – yet refusing to tell Margren just who his ma'aram was. Torture would have produced her name, but Margren did not want to bring damaged goods to her altar and she could not find another budding lifemage to take his place in a rite that was timed to the moon, stars, and planets. She opened his stomach from groin to breastbone, pulling out his entrails, letting them slither through her fingers as she read them. "Yes," she said. "The victory is ours. Aejs will die."

She ran her fingers through the child's thick hair again. It would have been nice to have kept him and trained him in the bedroom. She sighed, gestured for a thin young acolyte carrying a silver tray that bore a rune-carved chalice flanked by two stoppered bottles. She came to Margren's side, waiting patiently. Margren slashed the child's wrist, letting the artery in the left fill the chalice within an inch of the top. Then she added a dash from each stoppered bottle. She stirred it with her bloody dagger. The contents began to boil, steaming as if heated on a fire. Margren set the dagger aside, taking the chalice in the fingertips of both hands. She spoke to the cup and then drained it. All of her awareness, down to the smallest nerve endings tingled, then shrieked with the painful heat.

The sensations faded as quickly as they came. Margren opened her eyes having not realized she had closed them. A long, languorous, yet triumphant smile spread across her face: The change would be complete by winter solstice and she would be the most powerful sa'necari, dark mage, and paladin of the death god Bellocar, which had ever existed. Shaurone would fall in a day and the known world would follow.

As she left the altars, a young mon approached with a basin and another with towels. Margren cleaned her hands and the blade. As an afterthought she turned to her acolyte and said, "Show mercy to the boy." Then she walked away, not waiting to watch the blade still the child's heart.

A slender mon approached her as she shed her vestments, his slanted eyes a glowing amaranth, and a wisp of a black beard framed his large, sensual lips. "Farendarc is in Vorgensburg," the Waejontori adept told her.

"Good. Once Aejs is dead we can move on to other things."

\* \* \* \*

"Ie. Ie. Ie," Tagalong murmured. "Father of Stone, bear witness, I see him first, I'm taking him out from the back." She smashed her broad stout fist on the table so hard the wood groaned and trembled. She leaned into Brendorn's face and a ray of sunlight falling across her from a parting in the curtains lit her hair to the color of flame.

"Sometimes, Tagalong," Brendorn smiled, relief and hope showing in every angle of his face, "the best kind of friend a paladin can have is anything but another paladin."



Tagalong nodded. "Aejys don't backstab ... even to save her life. Don't mean I won't. I'm no puddin' head paladin," she bristled. "Not goin' ta let some butchersmate take out my best friend. Period. End of story. Yeah, uh huh." Then she added abruptly, "But I want one thing fer ya ta understand. That's ya don't mix it up with this piece of fucked shit. Ya and I both know that sword at yer side is a lie and a fraud, fer appearances only. If ya encounter him, ya gotta rabbit and yell. This household has been handlin' far worse things than Farendarc fer two years now. Ya leave him ta us. Promise me."

"I'll try..."

Tagalong gave him a hard assessing look, heavy on the dubious side. "If anything happened ta ya now, it'd break Aejys heart fer sure. Promise ya won't do anything foolish."

"I promise."

"And if there's time I'll find me a red raven."

"A what?"

Tagalong showed him a sneering grin. "Between me and the doorpost."

\* \* \* \*

Isranon ignored the stares he always drew as he strode to the farthest end of Dragonshead and emerged into the air to stand in the windswept night, sucking air to still the shaking in his body and awareness. The moment he learned of the rite Margren intended, Isranon had headed for the surface to be as far from it as possible. The energies always leaked out, despite the heavy shielding in the Chamber of Hecatomb. Where others of his kind, other sa'necari – Isranon tried not to focus on the fact that he was one of them – drank in the victims' suffering and terror like psychic wine, it made him nauseous. Sometimes he handled it better and sometimes worse. So much depended on what had happened already the day he encountered it, what his reserves of self control were like.

He could not bear to be within sensing or hearing distance of others' suffering when he could do nothing to affect it. There was so little he could do to affect it. Mostly Isranon chose his dead father's path of passive resistance among the monsters, as he did now, but he would defend himself if forced – in that much he differed from his father's beliefs and he had that from his godfather, the lycan lawgiver, Nevin.

Isranon moved deeper into the ruins, finding a tree sheltered spot and settled cross-legged. He took out his flute from a oiled case that hung around his neck and began to play. The sound soothed his heart. He was Isranon, son of Isranon, son of Isranon, all the way back to Isranon called the Dawnhand, speaker to spirits.

His broad shouldered, sturdy body bore many aged scars beneath his robes that refused to be healed away, no matter how many times he fed – scars from the times he had offered himself in the place of others when the more violent of his sa'necari brethren wished to punish their cattle out of hand and he could not bear to witness it. They thought he liked pain, when actually he could not bear to witness the suffering of the helpless when he knew himself strong enough to endure their rough handling, being one of their own.

And he endured it always without a sound, giving them no satisfaction in their violence, no gift of terror to soak up and savor. Physical pain and the anguish of the spirit were not the same. What he could not understand was why, when blood should have healed all – why did he scar when the others did not? Even for one who had chosen not to cross the line into full darkness with the rites, blood still should have healed all. They dared not go too far with him because he belonged to the prince. But, in a world steeped in treachery, there would come a time when the prince would not be looking – and Isranon watched his back. Yet he refused to deny his name or take a life out of appetite or rite to increase his powers and only Mephistis' patronage had kept him alive for the last three years.

A nibari stole into the shelter with him, settling against him. She pushed under his arm so that her head lay on his lap, turning slightly to offer him her neck. Rose was tiny, but nicely filled out at breast and hips. Her hair spread in a light brown wealth across him. The nibari, often derisively called nibblets, were the main cattle intended for light feeding; genetically altered humans been bred for docility. Then there were the depnane, those marked for death in the rites or complete consumption – most often captives taken from villages and other places or purchased as slaves.

Isranon glanced down at her and then away. "You should go back, Rose," he told her. "The rougher ones tend to single out any they think I favor."

"But you're hungry, I sensed it when you passed me."

Isranon wanted to deny it, but Rose was right. He could feel his fangs pricking his tongue. They were fully descended. He counted it good that sa'necari were so randomly fertile since they were the vilest feeders on death imaginable, even worse than the vampires. He hated his own kind. Waejonan had forced the sa'necari state upon the descendants of Isranon Dawnhand as the price of sparing their families and eventually it had altered their genes so that they had begun to be born sa'necari as it was with the other lineages. For those who came to style themselves the Dark Brothers of the Light it was considered a curse. They had fled into hiding, and were hunted down as heretics for living in peaceful symbiosis with their nibari and other races.

He brushed her hair from her neck, turning her in his arms and broke the skin, drinking gently. In the shadows, a figure watched. The newcomer was tall, broad

shouldered and wore his hair slicked back to the base where it was braided into a wealth of tiny braids. After a while, the mon walked on.

\* \* \* \*

The L-shaped stable of the Cock and Boar dominated the northeast corner of the courtyard quad. Large double doors faced south with a small postern door on the west side. The four roomy box stalls squared the four corners and another four lined the west wall. The place smelled of hay and animals. The smaller stalls contained the various mounts of the inn's guests and animals held over for shipment to foreign ports. Hay covered the flag-stoned floor and bales stood piled in two of the box stalls as well as stacked in the loft. Brendorn glanced about for Clemmerick who lived in the loft and cared for the place and its animals. He had discovered that if he asked anyone who was not of Aejs' household where to find Josh he usually got a reply of "You mean the Sot? I don't know. Sleeping one off someplace." So he had gone looking for Clemmerick. When the sylvan could not find him, he walked to Gwyndar's large box stall and leaned over the door. The young half-breed peered in. He saw the sot's hunched figure half buried by the straw as if hiding. As soon as Clemmerick had gotten him back from Branch's, Josh had headed for the barn.

"Josh?"

"Go 'way," Josh snarled crossly.

Brendorn flipped the catch and entered, securing the door behind him. He knelt in the straw, brushing it aside until he could see the sot's face. Josh winced and tried to burrow deeper, but each time Brendorn patiently dug him out again. "I want to talk to you. Aejs is rather fond of you."

Josh did not reply. He was thoroughly drunk and still drinking. Straw thatched his brown head and bristled from his beard alongside dribbles of whiskey. Sweat and spilt booze stained his shirt in a rancid mess. He was sweating hard despite the night's cool air, sweating whiskey through every pore.

Brendorn got closer on his hands and knees. "You shouldn't drink so much. You'll be sick before morning."

"Don't matter. Don't care," Josh gave him a look that would have been savage if he had been sober. Instead it was slightly peculiar, very odd, and in no way threatening.

"You don't like me," Brendorn spoke gently, taking the bite out of his words.

"Nah, I don't." Josh took another swig, capped the flask, and shoved it behind him as if afraid Brendorn would take it away.

"Why? We haven't even spoken until now." Brendorn settled cross-legged beside Josh.

"Yer Aejs husband."

"Ah," Brendorn nodded thoughtfully, remembering how often it had seemed as if half the realm were in love with her. "So you are in love with Aejs."

"That's straight. Best woman ever was. Traded me nightmare for nightmare."

Brendorn sensed the meaning of Josh's words and the realization stunned him. "She told you about Bucharsa?"

Josh nodded solemnly. "Traded me nightmare for nightmare. Took guts."

"She hasn't spoken to anyone else about it. You must be special to her."

Josh brightened. "Think so?"

"I do. Will you share with me what happened there? Then I can help Aejs."

"Why?" Josh glared suspiciously, moving away from Brendorn. Belatedly Josh saw his flask lying between them. "Why didn't she tell ya?"

Brendorn picked up Josh's flask.

"Thas mine."

"I know," Brendorn extended it to him.

Josh regarded Brendorn with an odd intensity, measuring him with that inner eye awakened by booze and the holadil, the sylvan drug that would never leave his system. For a fleeting moment Brendorn felt like a pinioned bird beneath that gaze. The skin on his neck prickled as he felt a pure ethereal power rise around him. He could smell power, taste it as a dry metallic sourness on his tongue.

Then Josh snatched the flask, and swigged from it. He wiped his mouth on his shirtsleeve, and then capped the bottle again. His eyes, red and rheumy looking, gained a sudden clarity. The ethereal energies came together around the sot like a brilliant cloak. He leaned so near to Brendorn that he nearly tipped himself over.

Brendorn stayed still, afraid the smallest movement would frighten him. He had the sylvan gift of gaining the trust of small creatures: At that moment the sot seemed like a small, suspicious, maybe a little frightened, creature to Brendorn. So, although the Josh's reeking odor made the gardener's stomach queasy, he did not move, enduring the strange examination in silent stillness.

"She didn't tell ya, cuz she din tell anyun. Jest me. Told me so. Talkin' bout it hurt. Saw inner face." Josh folded his arms across his stomach and bent over them in

mock pain, rocking slightly. "Yer not so special, husband," Josh sneered as he straightened.

"I guess I'm not. But I love her every bit as much as you do. I want to help her. I have come to die for her if need be," Brendorn said with such sadness that Josh softened.

"I see that," Josh said suddenly, moving to sit beside Brendorn again.

So Josh told, in as great a detail as he could remember, of how Aeijys had led her warriors in the assault on Bucharsa Temple, of how she wanted revenge for the massacred innocents at the West Temple where Thendaric died. She got separated from her advance guard. Josh told it in a sometimes jumbled order, going back and forth to correct himself.

Brendorn's face softened as he listened. Tears ran down Brendorn's sensitive face. "Aeijys. My dearest Aeijys, why didn't you tell me? Why did you leave me to guess?"

Josh leaned over, his shoulder pressing Brendorn's, his head on the sylvan's shoulder, round ear pressed to pointed one, and patted Brendorn's hand sympathetically. "Aeijys jest don open up much. Not easy fer her ta do. 'Cept with Tagalong. Yer know whut I mean."

Brendorn hugged Josh. "You've answered the last questions. I understand now. You've given my love back to me as whole as she was before the war."

Josh shoved his flask in Brendorn's face. "Then celebrate."

Brendorn accepted the flask, wiped the mouth off with his sleeve, and took a swig. It burned going down.

\* \* \* \*

Aeijys settled on a wide smooth rock beside the falls. She ignored the water splashing over her and turned deep within herself. She felt some small surprise at how easily she entered the full reflective state after seven years away from such things.

Slowly she walked through the memories that surfaced in the stillness. Aeijys stood in her ma'aram's rooms looking out the window over the courtyard where the levies were gathering. She watched the fluttering mosaic of brightly colored banners of clan and house; and the personal ones belonging to the heroes granted their own mark by the queen. She saw her own banner: three rowans circled by the ouroboros, evergreen against a royal purple.

"Do you know what you are asking, Ma'aram?" Aeijys turned from the window, her crested helmet hung from her hands by the chinstrap; she wore a silken surcoat over

her mail hauberk and leggings. "Margren hates me! That promise would destroy me more surely than any Waejontori hell I march into."

Tears ran down Kaethreyn's strong-featured face. She was a handsome woman, her face a perfect oval, "Margren is not your enemy! You just don't understand her, that's all."

Aejys snorted and moved off, it was like talking to a wall. "I am not Margren's enemy. But she makes herself mine."

"That is not true! I know it even if you do not. Promise me, Aejustrys ... promise me you'll do nothing to harm her."

"I can't."

"For the love of God! If you cannot make me this promise, then you hold no love for me or your God! Go on! Go die in Waejontor! But don't come back here! Because I'll set my life between you and your sister!"

Aejys paled, turning sick to her stomach, She threw herself down at her ma'aram's knee. "Don't say that! You don't mean it. You can't mean it."

Kaethreyn pressed her hands to her weary face, weeping harder. "No, Aejys. I don't mean it. I'm tired. I love you, Aejys," she lifted her daughter's face and kissed it. "But the problems between you and Margren make me feel so sad, so desperately sad. You are the strong one. Margren is so weak, so vulnerable..."

"Ma'aram, stop crying. Please stop crying. I promise I will never do the smallest thing to harm Margren. On my honor, my life be forfeit to God, I swear it.."

My life be forfeit ... my life be forfeit ... forfeit...

\* \* \* \*

Tagalong hit the streets that night, going from taproom to taproom on the dockside of town, discretely asking to buy a red raven. Red raven was a code name for members of the Assassins' Guild. You let them know you were looking, but you never went to them, they came to you.

Toward midnight she settled down in a grimy booth in a tiny hole in the wall called The Barking Spider. Hay covered the floor to absorb the spills and vomit which Tagalong could already smell. Down in the far corner a lean, gnarled old mon drew on a long stemmed pipe and regarded her through the smoke. He looked vaguely familiar, but Tagalong could not place him. The proprietor appeared with a tankard of watered ale: as he set it down, his gaze followed hers and he said, "Don't go messing with the gaffer, mon. Don't want no trouble here."

Tagalong gave him a sneering headshake. She picked up her ale and pushed past him, starting toward the old mon. Two young toughs rose from another table to block her path.

"Gaffer don't wantta talk to ya," one of them drawled.

"Take your business elsewhere, dwarf."

The contempt in the second one's voice rankled. It had been a long day, a longer night, and Tagalong Smith was fresh out of patience. With the tremendous strength of her race, which always astonished the humans, Tagalong picked up the second one and threw him across the room. He slammed against the wall and slid down overturning chairs and a table as he went. The first reached for his sword, but Tagalong already had her hammer out. She gave him a poke in the stomach that doubled him over. He spewed his night's drinking all over himself, the floor, and Tagalong. She backed off with a disgusted look, caught sight of the proprietor approaching with three more myn and decided that discretion was the better part of valor: especially since she did not want to chance killing one of them and put herself at odds with the Guild – if that was what they were. She wouldn't talk to the gaffer that night, but she felt sure that he was the man she was looking for. There would be other nights. Tagalong whirled and raced out the front door.

She dragged home in the wee hours of the next morning, tired and worried.

\* \* \* \*

At sunrise Suthana came out with a plate of bread and cheese and a pitcher of frothy beer. Aejs stirred from her reverie and glanced at the food, realizing that she was hungry.

"Soon," Suthana said. "Remove your clothing."

Aejys stripped and so did the priest. Suthana took Aejs by the hand, leading her into the waterfall. They stood beneath it with the rushing water striking their naked bodies. Then Suthana began to speak. She asked permission of a willow hanging over the water, broke off a branch, and thanked the tree. The priest struck Aejs with it across the back three times, and then she plucked moss and rubbed Aejs' entire body with it, speaking the words of the ritual cleansing. They emerged from the water. Aejs ate and then slept on the bank of the waterfall for the first time since her period of reflection began.

When she woke in the early afternoon Suthana brought Aejs a gray scarf of penitence and tied it around her right arm. "Wear this until you find the strength to truly pray, to give her your heart and your trust. When you return to the God's favor, remove it."

"And if I never can?"

"Then wear it until you die, and God have mercy on your soul."

\* \* \* \*

Tagalong slept late into the early afternoon. Clemmerick left to purchase hay and oats and see to a fancy bridle being made for Tagalong's horse by the local tanner. Life went on as usual, but the servants were watchful.

Tamlestari and Cassana posted themselves outside the city gates, hidden high in the trees, watching for Farendarc to shoot him with bows. Cassana had no compunctions about this, she was not ha'taren. Farendarc was a monster and they could not take him fairly. They never saw him. After coming down the coast by boat in a round about route, he had been in Vorgensburg for three days watching the inn,. His brother, Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan, had made full and canny use of their late father's old network of spies to fish for information and other useful things. Mephistis' people had many ways of getting their agents in and out of Vorgensburg.

At six foot three, Farendarc stood a fraction taller than Aejs. His full mouth twisted in a perpetual sneer and his heavy brows drew together in a scowl of hatred for all that lived. His jaw was too heavy for the average Sharani male, his body too broad and tremendously muscled, but he had glossy red brown skin and heavy smoke black hair like Aejs and Cassana. He went shirtless, wearing just his breeches, boots, and his two blades: sword and dagger. There were no scars anywhere on his body, except a long one crossing his right cheek as Tamlestari had described.

He moved like a cat, stepping from the street into the stable yard, and glancing about the torchlit open deciding between the stables and the brightly lit tavern as the best place to make trouble and force Aejs into the open. Ahead of him the side door to the stable opened and a familiar figure stepped out. A feral grin split his features.

"We meet again, Breed," he said.

Brendorn glanced up; startled by the movement his usually quick eyes had not caught. His pulse raced and a stone seemed to form in his stomach. He wondered how the duelist had gotten into the city past Cassana and Tamlestari, but before he could think further, Farendarc was on him. The duelist shoved him roughly back into the stable.

"You here to warn Aejs or run interference for the gutterscrew."

Brendorn visibly flinched at the epithet, but his voice was even, "I do what needs to be done."

Farendarc shook his head with mock regret. "Eager to die, Breed?"



"If need be." Brendorn schooled the fear from his voice, fear for Aejys as much as for himself. His hand dropped to the sword hilt at his side. He was quick, very quick, but there was an art to the blade that he knew he sorely lacked. He had promised Tagalong that he would run away, flee a fight, but there was no place to run.

Farendarc's gaze flicked across the stalls without entirely leaving the young sylvan. The stable appeared to be empty except for a scattering of horses, and two wynderjyns who screamed and began to kick their stall doors, trying to break free. "You been inside your filthy bitch yet? Was she nice and wet for you? You know, I've been promised your daughter as a reward for this job," he sneered. "I'm going to do that fancy bitch up good when I'm done with this one. My cock's just itching to get inside her. I'm going to fuck her to death. Maybe beat her a little between rounds."

"Never! You'll never touch either of them," Brendorn screamed, drawing his sword and lunging at the duelist in one of the few decent attacks Ladonys had managed to instill in him. Farendarc laughed, drawing and stepping back just a pace as he casually turned Brendorn's assault back on him. Brendorn was quick, but Farendarc moved with uncanny speed. He beat down Brendorn's defenses in three moves to shove his sword in just under the breastbone with a savage twist. Brendorn collapsed, writhing on the ground, breathing in sobbing gasps. Farendarc stood over Brendorn, pushing at his face and throat with the point. "All over now, Breed. I'm going to hand her your head." He raised the sword, holding it two handed for a clean, severing cut.

"Nooooo!" Josh dropped his flask, stumbling out of Gwyndar's empty stall next to Ajandar.

At Josh's shout, Farendarc's blade halted in its descent and moved to guard instead.

Josh opened Ajandar's stall, and then snatched open the gate to Emrindi. The huge animals charged Farendarc, driving him back from the wounded gardener. Josh snagged a pitchfork and stalked after him with a startling clarity in his booze-reddened eyes.

The duelist had never seen anything as strange and disturbing as the expression on the sot's face. Farendarc retreated into the stableyard. He slashed and stabbed, but the drunken sailor with his strange, unpredictable talents brought out by booze and holadil blocked him at every turn. Ajandar half reared, striking at him. He cut the wynderjyn in a long gash down the left foreleg. Josh blocked Farendarc's attempt to finish the animal. The right tine of the pitchfork gashed Farendarc's left arm. For only the second time in his life the duelist had been cut.

With a scream of rage, he whipped around on Josh. His sword laid Josh open in a shallow slash across the ribs. Josh sprang back, parrying with the pitchfork and

came on again as if unhurt. Then a horde of invisible pixies swarmed around Farendarc's ankles as Becca's tiny bouncers responded to the screams from the stables, stabbing his legs repeatedly with their small stinging blades. Farendarc slashed down at them and they fled. Grymlyken's forces reformed near the west end of the stableyard throwing small rocks.

"Load slings!" Grymlyken barked. "Fire!"

Pebbles pelted Farendarc. He howled when several struck his wounded arm.

"Load and fire!" Grymlyken shouted again.

The pixies launched more stones.

Farendarc spied Clemmerick approaching with a pike: the noise of the brief battle had managed to rouse the household. The duelist had no desire to stand against the huge ogre in addition to the others, so he withdrew to an alley mouth, ducking a third flight of stones. There he paused to shout, "The drunk dies next unless Aejys agrees to fight me! Leave me her answer on the dueling grounds before sunset tomorrow."

Then he vanished down the alley.

Tagalong plunged through the tavern doors into the courtyard just as Clemmerick arrived.

Josh stood sobbing brokenly. He let the fork slip from his fingers and clatter on the paving stones.

"Where's Farendarc?" Tagalong asked, her hammer in her hands.

"Gone."

Tagalong gripped Josh's elbow, steering him toward the tavern. "What happened?" Then she saw his torn shirt and the blood. "Josh, you're hurt."

"Brendorn's dead," Josh said. With an anguished cry he jerked away from Tagalong, fleeing into the streets.

Tagalong's broad, blunt face looked stunned. She shook her head. "No. That can't be ... he promised to run away. He promised..."

She ran for the stable with the two wynderjyns dancing agitatedly around her.

Tagalong found Brendorn lying in the straw, a small stain spreading through his tunic, he had entered a state of grace, when shock overrode the pain, and he did not feel his wound. Tagalong sat down beside him, cradling his head and shoulders. She examined the wound.

"I'm dying," Brendorn whispered weakly.

"Yes." The set of her mouth was grim, but her eyes held love and concern.

"Get Aejys, please. Want to see her, last time."

The yard had filled with patrons and servants gathered around the door. Becca shoved through them brusquely. "Go back," she ordered everyone. "Go back. It's under control." Then she saw Brendorn. "Oh, sweet gods, no. Clemmerick, clear the yard. Then come back."

Tagalong looked up as Becca knelt beside her. "Send someone quick for Cassana and Tamlestari."

Becca caught the scullery boy who had lingered next to her despite her admonition to clear the yard. "Go." Zacham raced off pell-mell.

"Becca, do you know where that Aroanan shrine is?"

"Yes."

"Can you ride?"

"My father had a farm. Of course I can ride."

"Take my Gwenny, and bring Aejys back quick. Brendorn's dying."

Dismay filled Becca's face; she whirled, running down the line of stalls.

Clemmerick brought a blanket, wrapped Brendorn, and carried him upstairs. They laid the dying sylvan in Aejys' bed.

As they settled him Tagalong remembered Josh. "Omigod!" She turned to Clemmerick, her usual sloppy speech patterns banished by urgency. "Find Josh quickly, Farendarc cut him. I don't know how seriously. I have no idea where he went."

Clemmerick looked grave as he nodded, "I know his bolt holes. I can find him."

\* \* \* \*

Aejys crawled onto the bed beside Brendorn and cradled his head in her lap. A red-purple stain showed about his lips and teeth. Tamlestari had given him Pollendine, a drug for pain so strong and potentially addictive that healers only gave it to the dying.

Brendorn reached weakly and touched the gray scarf tied to Aejs' arm. "I am glad ... of this," he said. "Josh told me ... Bucharsa. All of it. Sorry I did not ... understand."

"It's all right, Brendorn. It's all right." She kissed his forehead, cheeks, and lips.

"Love you, Aejs. Always. Song you sang Laeoli when she was frightened."

Aejs' eyes softened, sorrow set a turn to her lips. "Yes."

"Sing it."

The words were in Sharani, her voice was rusty. She had not sung since the West Temple fell. At first haltingly, then smoothing out, her voice rose in the words of a song about the God Aroana walking beside good children and keeping them safe. When she finished she saw that Brendorn was dead.

\* \* \* \*

Josh sat at a small table in Aejs' parlor, his shirt drawn loosely over his bandaged ribs. Aejs' eyes kept returning to that bandage and thinking about Brendorn. I was a fool. A bloody fool not to bring them with me. Brendorn would be alive now.

Aejs wore a black band on her left arm with a lock of Brendorn's hair sewn into the lining. Cassana sat at the table beside her, watching Aejs, dark eyes swollen with weeping yet grave and steady; the line of her full lips resolute.

Tamlestari settled cross-legged in the far corner with her back to the wall, looking much older than her sixteen years. Her eyes traced the patterns of the rugs while her hands folded and unfolded; rubbing together; pressing together; then lying still in her lap for a breath's span before starting the uneasy movements once more.

Tagalong occupied the couch under the window, her legs folded beneath her, refilling her mug of ale from the pitcher on the end table, working hard at getting drunk.

Aejs dipped her quill pen into the ink, finishing the note. She wrote it in High Sharani. Farendarc could read it, but it would be a mystery to the people of Vorgensburg.

"Have Becca tack this to the blood oak on the dueling field."

"Ya'r really gonna fight 'em," Tagalong said without looking up.

"Brendorn is dead. Tomorrow Farendarc will be."

"Even if you must die to do it?" Cassana demanded,

"Yes." Aeajys folded another letter, dripped wax on it, and sealed it with a ring she had not worn in over seven years. "This is my last will and testament. Should I die tomorrow take this to my ma'aram. It should force her to release Laeoli to Cassana's guardianship. If not ... do whatever you need to, my wealth is yours in this..." She shifted to face Cassana. "Just get Laeoli to Vorgensburg, get her out of Shaurone."

"As my honor is my life," Cassana accepted the paper that Aeajys slid over to her. A fresh wet glimmer began at the edge of her eyes but did not escape.

Aeajys went on, "Tag, if I die. You have my permission to kill Margren."

Tagalong's head came up and she showed all her teeth in savage glee.

"However, if I survive that permission is rescinded."

"Damn!" Tagalong went back to studying the pitcher of ale.

"Josh, I would consider it a great favor if you would stay sober until Farendarc is settled."

Josh nodded. "I promise."

"And I don't want either of you interfering with this duel. You understand me?"

"On my honor," Josh said glumly, drawing circles on the table with his finger. "But I don't like it."

Tagalong's eyes were fierce, her voice hoarse and low. "If ya go down, Aeajys," she said, just slightly above a whisper, her hand caressing her hammer in an obsessive, troubled motion, "I'll make a puddin' of his head 'fore he gets two steps off the field."

"But not before."

Tag's voice dropped still lower, her eyes hooding. "Not before. You have my word."

"And Tag, whichever way tomorrow goes, hire a half a score gray mice, two score red ravens, and two and a half score borrowed badgers to fetch Laeoli home. Make it look like a major trading expedition."

\* \* \* \*

Except for Tagalong, Aeajys' household did not know Brendorn, but because she loved him they loved him. And they grieved for her loss.

They buried Brendorn on the North bluffs above Vorgensburg in the shelter of the trees overlooking the sea where Aejys planned to one day build a manor house. If she lived.

\* \* \* \*

Dane strode down the corridors of Dragonshead. It must once have functioned as a tremendous underground citadel, a veritable city back during the Age of Burning, even before the most recent godwar which occurrence was estimated at between 50,000 and 20,000 years past. Certainly no technology exists to build it on this world now. Although, Ishla help me, I can remember when it did.

It was a warren of corridors and passages, chambers and alcoves. Dust lay thick over most of it and in the areas still unexplored. Broken chunks of strange brick and unfamiliar mortars lay scattered over the floors in places where it had finally begun to come loose from the walls. It smelled of damp and acridness and stale air in places farthest from the hidden vents that brought in fresh air from outside. Here and there fungi sprouted along the walls where the floor joined it.

He had spotted Isranon and lengthened his stride to overtake the youth. Dane started to call to him, only to see Isranon halt sharply and then turn into a largely unused corridor. Dane did not like the implications in the young sa'necari's movement and hurried.

On turning the same corner that Isranon had gone down, Dane saw a nibari, his arms raised to cover his face and head, crouched beneath the rain of blows from an older sa'necari. Isranon stepped between the next blow and the nibari, taking it himself. Dane sucked a breath at the youth's actions. Most sa'necari took their pique out on their nibari in this wise; those who Mephistis lodged at Dragonshead were no exception.

Dane grabbed the nibari and ran him down to an adjacent corridor. "Go to my people or hide, whatever, get out of here." The nibari always had boltholes of some kind to wait out their master's wrath. Then Dane returned.

Isranon met the raging sa'necari's eyes calmly. The sa'necari fetched Isranon a series of hard blows that should have gotten a sound out of him had he been nibari and then he seemed to notice the blades. Very few sa'necari carried swords, mostly they carried the runed hellblades and baneblades for the rites at their belts. The vampires of Dane's unit and the human soldiers of the prince carried swords. Isranon gave him no sounds, no taste of fear to savor. The youth merely regarded him with stone-faced pride and contempt.

The mon hesitated, trying to figure Isranon out and then withdrew.

Dane looked at the bloody tears the whip had left in Isranon's clothing and wondering what the youth's skin would look like beneath. "You've done this

before?" he guessed, suddenly realizing where the youth's reputation for liking pain had come from. Dane had never asked Isranon about it, but he had heard the rumors.

"Yes." Isranon refused to look at him, staring at a point over the vampire's shoulder.

Dane caught his elbow, turning him about. "What if he killed you?"

Isranon's voice went chill as the stone around them. "They always stop."

Dane snarled, drawing his lips back from his fangs, which were larger and more impressive than those of the sa'necari. "There will come a time when they will not stop. I begin to think I know your brethren better than you do."

Isranon shook him off, took two steps and staggered, almost falling.

Dane caught him. "Shit, the prince will think..."

He lifted the youth into his arms, slipped the edge of his cloak around him to half conceal who he carried and swept into a little used side corridor. In the darkness of a long abandoned chamber, amid the dust of ages, Dane pulled a bit of candle from his pocket and struck a lucifer to light it with.

A movement sent Dane's hand to his sword. He had greater weapons than the blade, but preferred to keep them secret from the sa'necari. The vampire trusted them no more than they trusted him. A slender figure crouched there and he made out the form of Rose, a small nibari from the main herd. He guessed her to be about Isranon's age and had seen them together.

Rose crept close, watching the vampire cautiously as she pushed her wrist into Isranon's mouth. The youth's fangs descended and he began to feed, which gradually roused him. Isranon pushed Rose away.

Dane noticed how wobbly the youth moved as he stood and slid an arm around him, while Rose did the same from the other side. Rose led them to another side corridor and then into Isranon's chambers through a door Dane had not been aware of before. Rose helped him to sit. She fetched a large urn, a basin, and cloths, and then began cleaning Isranon's injuries.

Dane stared at the multitude of old scars on the youth's body. For a sa'necari, blood would heal nearly anything. It was something the necromancers held in common with the vampires. Some said that the sa'necari had stolen that from the vampires, while others held that the vampires had acquired it from the sa'necari. Dane considered the entire argument worthless. People whose researches became enmeshed in such pedantry annoyed him. What he wanted to know was why this sa'necari youth did not heal properly.

"What made these?" Dame asked. "Kenda'ryl?" The magic metal often left hideous scars when it failed to kill. "Runed weapons?"

"He's not sa'necari," Rose interjected.

Isranon stiffened, the line of his mouth going tight. Dane regarded him and Rose for several minutes, waiting for an answer. Instead of answering, Isranon drew a flute case from around his neck and placed it in Dane's hands. Sa'necari did not like flutes, they were the sound of life and, the more deepened in death they became, the more intensely the sound of one appalled them.

Dane glanced at Isranon before opening it and at the youth's nod, he took the flute out. The vampire held it lovingly in his hands, recognizing what a fine instrument it was. It was silver and runed with a pattern glorifying life. He was struck by the presence of such a thing in a sa'necari's hands and then he read them and his head jerked up. "Isranon, son of Isranon, son of Isranon... This is Dawnhand's flute."

"I have never taken a life in the rites. I have never crossed that line..." Isranon said. "My father always told me, when the craving for blood arrived with puberty, that so long as I could play that flute and enjoy it, I would never become a monster."

Then Dane understood Rose's words. He was also beginning to see Mephistis' attraction to the youth more clearly. And that prompted him to say, "Then one day the others will kill you."

"To die for one's beliefs is a fine death."

### CHAPTER THREE. THE PRICE OF VENGEANCE

The pre-dawn mist off the bay still clung to the lanes and streets of Vorgensburg as Aejs walked to the dueling grounds at dawn. She had put aside her expensive new clothing, retreating into the comfortable old green pants, brown tunic and an old Kwaklahmyn fringed suede jacket which she had worn so often during her first months in Vorgensburg. She wore a different sword than usual; one she had carried during the war. The Aroanan rune graced the hilt and the blade bore the motto "For My God," on one side and "For Justice" on the other. It was Aroanan steel: one of the finest blades on the continent, ritually forged in the temple smithies. Her boot heels clicked on the cobblestones, seeming loud in the silence. The store windows were still dark, the doors not yet unlocked for morning commerce. She passed very few people.

Tagalong, Josh, Tamlestari, and Cassana followed at a respectful distance. Aejs wanted the silence and solitude. Grief gnawed at her as nothing had since Bucharsa. She blamed herself for Brendorn's death. She felt as if she could or should somehow reach back in time and change her decision, bring all her small family



forward as if they had never been separated, though she knew such a thing was impossible. Aeijys knew to think these thoughts, to feel them so intensely, was to court madness, but she could not stop them. She had watched such feelings destroy Tomyris Danae de Dovane – the Lionhawk – the great Sharani general whom she had followed into battle during the Great War.

Aeijys shook herself loose from that. "Damn you, Brendorn! Why couldn't you have waited?" Even as she said it she knew the answer. "Because you loved me." When I left I betrayed you. Abandoned you. You would have come had I asked. All of you. Aeijys drew a deep breath, mastering herself.

As she neared the dueling grounds, her palms began to itch, she could already feel the sword in her hand, her heart raced as anticipation sent that first eager rush of adrenaline through her veins. Her whole being seemed to throb as it had when she couched her lance and set heels to her mount during the war.

Farendarc lounged under a tree. He wore a long sleeved tunic and shirt to cover the bandaged cut in his shield arm. Aeijys and Farendarc carried sword and dagger, nothing more. He stepped out to face Aeijys directly. "You die first. Then the drunk."

Behind Farendarc and on either side of them people gathered under the trees. Becca and the servants had spread word of the duel. The more witnesses present, the less the likelihood of treachery. Becca had suggested it herself.

Aeijys shucked out of the coat, dropping it on the ground. Becca stepped in, picked it up and moved away, handing the jacket to another servant. Aeijys and Farendarc drew blades and circled. The crowd gradually moved closer to see better.

Becca's hand slipped into her pockets. She fingered her river stones, fidgeted with her sling and waited. The tavern master hoped that Farendarc would give her a reason to use them.

Aeijys was a soldier, not a duelist, and overmatched from the start by Farendarc. It showed in the first meeting of their blades. His was a rare talent, an uncanny gift of eye and hand and body that surpassed and exceeded all but a handful of heroes Aeijys had encountered in the entire course of her life. So far as she knew he was the only one of that degree of talent still living. Had his spirit matched his physical gifts he could have been a warrior saint; instead he was an oath breaker, a murderous blackguard as evil as any that climbed out of Bellocar's hells. Farendarc struck with great speed, his sword darted and thrust. She gave ground before him, barely turning his blade from her. Then with a sudden swift twist Farendarc's blade slid past her defenses and opened her shield arm from shoulder to elbow. The black armband fell away with Aeijys' blood on it. Farendarc pressed in, slashing her side, then striking high. The point caught her in the upper part of the left breast, an inch below the juncture of chest and shoulder. He jerked it free.

Aejys' eyes widened at the shock of impact. She staggered two steps, reeling like a drunk. The color drained from her face. Her knees gave. She collapsed on her face, struggling to push herself up. Her strength failed. With each breath fire seared through her chest. She lay with her arms crossed beneath her. She could see the blades of grass as if they were a forest rising around her eyes; feel the chill moisture of the morning dew. Through the grass she could see the hilt of her sword glittering in the sunlight. She managed to roll up a bit, freeing her good arm, reaching for the blade. She was a soldier; she had been in many battles; been cut before; she was not going to let it stop her now.

Josh started forward. Tagalong stopped him. "Don't interfere. Ya promised. Besides, he won't outlive her by much. That's my promise. I'm gonna kill that asshole."

He made a small anguished noise and fled, unable to watch Aejys die. That name was in his head again: Abelard. This time he would not go back to the barn. He did not want to be where anyone could find him.

Farendarc sheathed his sword, drawing his dagger. He approached Aejys to make sure of his kill. He tangled his fingers in her hair, yanking her up. He put the blade to her throat.

"No!" gasped Tamlestari. At the flexing of her arm, a slender dagger slipped from an arm sheath into her hand.

Cassana caught her arm as she shifted her grip from hilt to blade. "You can't take him out, child! You'll get just one try."

"I can mark him," Tamlestari growled.

"And die."

An angry protest erupted from the crowd. A small shower of rocks from several directions pelted Farendarc. He released Aejys, straightening to find the throwers.

Aejys slumped at the waist, her good hand pushing up against the ground. Near her sword, obscured by the grass lay two smooth flat round-edged stones, red with blue and green veins. Becca's river stones.

"Back off, butcher! She's down, duel's over!" Becca barked. The leather sling whirled three times, then released the stone. It smacked Farendarc's cheek, drawing blood.

"First blood and no more!" shouted someone in the crowd.

Farendarc's expression turned savage. In the past two days he had been marked, cut and bloodied more than all past times combined. Being male of Sharani blood, a

rare thing for that race, he had claimed his privileges and sat out the war. He had never been in a real battle. Now some members of Aeijys Rowan's household had declared war on him. He gave a snarling shout "You're dead, bitch! You're dead!"

"Doubt it!" Becca spit, backing up as she slipped another stone into her sling. "You'll have to reach me, goat-jacker."

Her stone smacked Farendarc in the chest, staggering him.

Zacham reached into his pockets, brought out more stones and pelted the duelist. Several ragged street children, friends of his, began to add their stones, chanting, "First blood, no more!"

Farendarc ignored the boy and the rest of his stone throwing friends, intent on Becca.

The certainty that Farendarc would kill Becca, and probably the others as well as Josh sent a dizzy rush of concern through Aeijys. The soldier did what she should have done in the beginning. She quit fighting the pain and weakness, accepted it, focused herself away from it, and reached through it. Aeijys' fingers curled around the hilt of her sword.

"One thing at a time," Farendarc said, reaching for Aeijys again.

Snarling, Aeijys rose to her knees, shoving her sword into his stomach before he even realized she had picked it up. Farendarc clutched himself, his fingers digging into his flesh around the blade. His eyes bulged in disbelief and he fell, his weight dragging the sword hilt from Aeijys' hand. The children rushed in and began kicking the dying duelist.

Aeijys swayed, trying for a moment to gain mastery of her body, then crumpled. She rolled onto her good side, curling into a tight ball of pain; each breath a searing agony. Tagalong's broad strong hands raised her, settling Aeijys' head and shoulders on her lap. The stout dwarf stroked her hair, muttering worriedly, "Don't go following Brendorn. He'll still be waiting fer ya five score years from now. Ya hear me. Don't go, Aeijys."

"Try not to," Aeijys rasped. "Hurts to ... to breathe."

Cassana and Tamlestari knelt beside Aeijys, checking her wounds. The arm and side bled heavily. Tamlestari opened Aeijys' shirt. Pink-flecked white foam formed around the chest wound, increasing with each struggling breath. Tamlestari gave Cassana a worried glance. Then the youth's fingers stroked the bare flesh around the wound, her eyes going distant.

Tagalong's head came up and she looked sharply at Cassana, "Stone Father! She's a Reader!"

Cassana nodded and motioned for Tagalong to be silent. "And a damned good surgeon."

"Sucking chest wound. Internal bleeding," Tamlestari muttered. It did not include a punctured lung, although the pressure of accumulating blood could easily collapse the lungs. She pulled gauze and a jar of salve from her bag. She put a large quantity of the salve on the gauze, then pressed it down hard on the chest wound, sealing it. Aejs' breathing eased. Tamlestari brought Tagalong's hand over to hold the compress in place.

Tamlestari opened Aejs' shirt and bound her side up. Then she bandaged her arm and strapped it down.

"Take a little of this," Cassana said, raising a small flask of holadil to Aejs' lips.

Aejs swallowed the thick syrupy liquid. Warmth flooded her and the pain retreated. Her body relaxed and uncurled. Only the gnawing weakness of blood loss and shock remained. She closed her eyes and slid into sleep.

"How bad?" Tagalong asked Tamlestari.

"Bad enough. We must get her home quickly where I can repair that chest wound."

\* \* \* \*

A tiny matchstick of a man in a black, knee-length sleeveless coat pulled at Thomas Cedarbird, hurrying him toward the dueling grounds. "Please, sir, you must come quickly." Darlbret continued to urge Thomas forward, shoving through the throng at the dueling grounds. People glared at them, then recognized the syndic, and opened a path.

Thomas Cedarbird's left braid hung half-finished and his hair on the right was still loose. "I don't know why you insisted on dragging me down here. You know I don't like watching duels ... oh ... dear gods, Aejs." Thomas rounded on Darlbret. "Why didn't you tell me it was Aejs?"

"I – I wasn't sure..." Darlbret stammered. "It might have been just a rumor... I just heard about it minutes ago..."

Thomas knelt beside Tag, his hand reaching almost of its own volition to touch Aejs' cheek: that was something he would never have done were she conscious. "Is she...?"

"Alive?" Tag said, "Somewhat."

"Why didn't you tell me about this... I might could have done something..."

"Aejys pays her own debts, merchant," Tag said caustically. "And I pay the ones she can't. Now back off, we've heard enough from ya ta last ten lifetimes. Uh huh! Period. End of Story!"

Thomas winced and sat back on his heels, saying nothing more. He doubted he would ever know or understand why Tagalong Smith disliked him so much. And even if he did, he wasn't sure he could change it. But maybe Darlbret could either discover it or explain it.

Becca formed the servants into a protective circle just as the city guard arrived and took positions around Aejys. Then the tavern master, after spitting in Farendarc's face and scattering the children, methodically searched the slowly dying assassin, even pulling his boots off. Her hands, though roughed by years of work in the kitchens, were still surprisingly nimble. She found a small fold and ran her finger along it to reveal a pocket. Where most would not have found it, just right to have concealed some orders or a contract. In the concealed pocket in the left boot Becca found several papers. She shoved them into her pockets to share later. She placed her foot firmly on Farendarc's chest and yanked Aejys' sword free, wiping it clean on his pants leg.

"Becca, quick! We need a litter," Tamlestari told her.

"I will carry her," said a rough voice as a huge form rose from the deep shadows of a nearby oak cluster. Clemmerick lifted Aejys as tenderly and easily as a mother lifting an infant.

Becca gathered up Farendarc's belongings, handing them to Raim and Omer to carry. Tagalong had to trot to keep up with the ogre. Cassana and Tamlestari strode quickly along beside Clemmerick while the rest followed closely.

Spectators drifting past Farendarc paused to spit on his body, then trailed after Aejys' entourage to see if they could learn anything. Thomas Cedarbird did not want to draw Tagalong's ire, so he did not try to insinuate himself into the main group. But he followed and the crowd formed behind him of the curious and the concerned.

\* \* \* \*

In the shadows near a stand of broad cedars a thin, baby-faced mon with a wispy wheaten beard and long, red-streaked blond hair that hung loose about his face watched Aejys removed from the field. He rubbed his mouth and chin thoughtfully, then stepped into the deepening sunlight which threw shadows among the folds of his steel gray pilgrim robes. The mon considered what he had just seen. While customs differed from community to community, it was generally held that one did not finish off a dueling opponent after they went down except in the case of certain types of judicial duels ordered by the local Courts Baron. The decision of death was generally left to the gods and the nature of the wounds. Even so, members of the

watching crowd rarely intervened when a duelist transgressed the customs unless they were family members of the fallen one. He shook back his hood as he approached the place where Aeijys had gone down, scanning the ground where he had seen something fall. He scooped up the sword-torn black band and the lock of auburn hair spilling from it, folded it respectfully into the pockets of his robes, and left the green. The devotion of the wounded mon's servants intrigued the pilgrim. He would ask around and find out who she was.

\* \* \* \*

Cassana emerged from Aeijys' room, haggard and exhausted. There were bloodstains on her tunic from working on Aeijys' wounds. She descended the stairs, walking as though there were weights around her ankles. The kitchen servants clustered at the door, watching her. The taproom was empty of patrons: Becca had closed up shop as soon as they had returned from the dueling grounds.

"Mei Ajan?" Becca pushed through her kitchen staff and met Cassana at the foot of the stairs, guiding her to a table near the back. "Aeijys?"

"Resting."

Becca thought about that. "Then she will be all right?"

"It is too soon to say, Becca," Cassana said, dropping into the chair. "Aeijys lost a lot of blood, she is very weak."

The tavern master turned her face away, her mouth drawn taut. "Our lives ... pivot on hers." Becca made a circle with her forefinger like a wheel spinning slowly. "She pulled many of us out of the gutters. Traded us a better life ... better way ... for our allegiance. We gave her that – and our love. It's like belonging to one of the Lords of Legend. What will become of us if she dies?"

Cassana patted Becca's hand. "Have faith. Send servants to make offerings and pray."

"I already have. We have three temples. One to Nerindalori of the Waves, one to Willodarus Lord of the Woodlands, and a small shrine to Ishla Twice Gendered. I have sent everyone who could be spared – and some that couldn't – to pray and make offerings."

"Do not forget the shrine to Aroana."

"I haven't."

Zacham brought Cassana a tray of food: hot stew, sliced meats, cheese, bread and pastries as well as a pitcher of beer, sitting them down in front of her, "Mei Ajan needs to eat," the scullery boy said.

A small, amused smile stole some of the weariness from Cassana's face at his use of the proper Sharani title, certain that Becca had taught him this. Becca's change of attitude, from defensiveness to deference, tickled a small chord in Cassana.

Another young man brought a basin of cool water and towels.

Cassana washed her arms and face, then began to eat.

Becca sat down opposite her and pulled Farendarc's papers from her pockets. She pushed them to Cassana.

"What is this?" Cassana asked accepting the papers.

"They were in his boot," Becca told her.

"Important?"

"I don't know, mei ajan," Becca said. "I can't read. I keep my accounts with tithing sticks and Clemmerick records them."

That startled Cassana, who tended to forget that other realms were far less literate than Shaurone where even the poorest classes learned to read. "Does Aejs know?"

Becca shook her head. "Clemmerick is the only one here who can read. His mother is a poet."

"When all this is over and Laeoli's safe, I'll see that you all learn," she said. "Even if I must teach you myself."

Cassana glanced quickly at the first three papers, but on the fourth her eyes widened and she cursed, "Gods' Haven!"

Farendarc,

Here is the agreed price for Aejs. Bring me her head as proof. There will be a bonus for all key members of her household butchered. Fifty gold a head. I'm placing a unit of gold ravens at your disposal if needed. Blame the red ravens whenever possible.

There will be a bonus for dead reds.

If any of Aejs' people try to reach Shaurone, destroy them. My creatures are gathering to march.

In regards to our last conversation. Yes. Laeoli is yours if you still want her. She should make a satisfactory leman once you break her to the role.

Move quickly,

M

Anger washed the weariness from Cassana. "Find Tagalong. I don't know what some of these references are to, but I think we may have a war on our hands."

\* \* \* \*

Tagalong slipped quietly into Aejs' bedroom in the early evening, pulled a chair up and sat down beside Cassana.

"Where have you been, Tag?" Cassana asked. "I've had people looking all over the city for you."

"Takin' care of business. She be alright, Sana?"

Cassana's young-old face looked worn, dark half moons beneath her eyes. "I can't say, Tag. Tamlestari is very talented. She repaired the chest wound. But Aejs lost a lot of blood before we could get the bleeding stopped." Cassana rubbed her tired face. "Aejs is a tough old badger, though. I wouldn't worry too much."

Tagalong gave a wan smile, stood, and went to the bed. "Can't not worry. Aejs and me, we been partners nearly thirty years. Not sure what I'd do without her."

Cassana nodded, moving to stand beside the stout dwarf. "I've known her almost as long. But I hear what you're saying. I'm sure she'll be fine. So long as no fever sets in." She slipped her arm around the dwarf's sturdy shoulders and squeezed gently. "I think we have some serious trouble, Tag. Read this," Cassana gave Tagalong Farendarc's papers. "Wake Tamlestari to come relieve me. Then we'll talk about these."

\* \* \* \*

The sea air smelled of salt and the approach of rain. A chill breeze spread off the ocean, bringing an unseasonable mist. Torches shown like burning will-o'-wisps wrapped in cloaks of gray fog. Tagalong pulled her blue wool cloak tight against the chill night air. She craved a solitude she could not find amongst the worried servants and friends hovering over her at the Cock and Boar, yet dreaded the isolated stillness of her rooms where her thoughts and fears seemed so loud and overwhelming. Storekeepers blew out their lights, locking up for the night as she stalked past. Prostitutes in the pleasure quarter who had squandered many hours gossiping with the stout dwarf watched her go by without hailing her. They were one of Tagalong's best sources of information. She bought them expensive meals and drink for their company and hard coin for anything she could use in a timely fashion. They read her need to be alone in the angles of her body and respected it. Everyone knew about



the duel, the whole city spoke of nothing else, but not to Tagalong.

Now and again her thoughts strayed to the letter found in Farendarc's boot and she swore savagely under her breath. "Aejys' hurt and Margren's behind it! I know it! I know it! So help me, Father of Stone, I'm gonna kill Margren."

She turned down the alleys repeatedly to avoid the night watch, since they would want to express their opinion about it all and Tagalong did not feel like listening. She needed to walk out all the anger, grief and worry without anyone intruding on it. The bells in the tower of the Ralenan Cathedral rang the midnight hour as she emerged from an alley and turned smack into the watch. By the light of their lanterns they recognized her. As she knew they would, one tried to say something, but his companion stopped him as Tagalong simply turned away from them and they let her go on.

"Leave her be," the mon said. "She's got things on her mind."

Toward dawn it began to rain and still she walked. Tagalong walked the streets until her legs hurt; until she sweated in the chill ocean breeze, her body's moisture mingling with that of the air. Slowly the physical exertion purged her psyche of worry.

To lose Aejys would be to lose a piece of herself. They had been friends since early childhood. In fact, Tagalong could not remember a time before they had been friends and she did not want to imagine life without Aejys. She dragged herself home in the early morning, walked into the barn and settled by the spot where she had found Brendorn the day before the duel. There she finally freed the tears she had withheld in grim silence.

First time I saw Brendorn was when Aejys didn't show up for the picnic. Ladonys and I waited seemed like forever. Then we split up and went looking for her. Running out of places to look, I finally checked that secret corner of the armory loft where they stored extra hay and saddles and stuff. That's where I found her. Asleep with her arms around Brendorn. Neither of them with a stitch of clothes on. Gods! He was pretty! Skin like milk and not a blemish, curling auburn hair well past his shoulders; an angel with pointed ears. Well-built in all the right places. Temple had gotten a special dispensation to bring him in to care for the gardens at a time when normally the only non-Sharani males allowed into the realm were slaves. Aejys was just two weeks short of her consecration to Aroana at sixteen. I knew right then why Aejys loved him, besides him being so pretty. All that skirmishing with the Waejontori before it became a full-fledged war, gentleness seemed to be dying out. Yet there it was in a fair face and auburn hair. I left without waking them.

Tagalong clutched at the straw as if it still held Brendorn's blood and threw it with a single shattered howl in all directions. "So help me, Gimligloikynen! I'm gonna kill Margren! Permission or no permission!"

\* \* \* \*

Becca, emerging from the kitchens, looked up at the sound, as did everyone in the building. "Get back to work," she told them, crossing the common room and heading quickly out the back door into the courtyard. She paused to scan the yard, then headed for the stable.

Fezelbaum, Grymlyken's lieutenant, crouched beside Tagalong, peering worriedly into the troubled dwarf's face. His little cohort of pixies hovered about them.

Becca sized up the situation in a glance, put on a brusque demeanor, and strode through the pixies. "What is going on here? That sound woke all our lodgers, frightened half the staff!" She bent over Tagalong and shook her roughly. Fezelbaum started to protest; Becca blocked him with a glance. "Tag, where have you been? Aejs has been asking for you."

"She's awake?" Tagalong's exhaustion vanished.

"She may be sleeping again. I got her to take some broth."

Tagalong rushed from the barn. Curious people clustered at the back door, Tagalong shoved through them without explanation, thundered up the stairs, and burst into the room. "Aejys!"

Tamlestari turned on her. "Quiet!"

"It's ... all ... right." Aejs said softly as if even that wearied her. "I'm a little tired, Tag."

Tagalong snorted. "Not surprised. Ya bled like a god-fartin' pig."

Aejys' dark eyes glanced sidewise at her friend. A faint smile touched the edges of her mouth. "I need..." she said still more softly, more slowly. "Two. Score. Red Ravens. In various plumage. I want whatever ... you can find of ... Jon Dawn's legion."

"It'll take time, Aejs, they're disbanded. Fer them and that many I'll need special permission. From the Grand Master himself."

"I know." She stretched out her hand and Tagalong clasped it in both of hers. "Tag. Don't. Drag. Your. Feet."

"I won't Aejs, I promise."

But Aejs wasn't listening. She had fallen asleep again.

Tagalong shot Tamlestari a worried glance.

Tamlestari shook her head. "She'll sleep like that for a few days. And I dosed her with holadil. She lives up to her legends. So much courage and resourcefulness."

Tagalong snorted, "Enough ta get herself killed one day. Now, on the subject of holadil, Josh had a queer reaction to that stuff."

Tamlestari nodded. "Gwyndar told me about that. Never heard of it happening before... He must be a really odd genetic type. I'd like to read him."

"You're a touch healer?"

The young Sharani-sylvan shook her head. "I wish. No, I'm just a Reader and surgeon. They say I have a gift. I have been able Read things and people when I touch them since I was very small. I sensed how to repair that sucking chest wound. I could feel every tear and the movement of her blood. The way it bled internally. And I knew when I finished that nothing had been missed. But I cannot heal by touch alone," Tamlestari turned toward Tagalong, "Tag," she asked abruptly, "Did you know my ma'aram?"

Tagalong nodded. "Not as well as Aejs did."

"Do you think Aejs would mind if I asked about her?"

"Nah."

"Thank you."

\* \* \* \*

At Becca's urging, Clemmerick spent the hours following the duel looking for Josh. He searched the stable, the lofts, the attics, and store rooms as well as those of the connecting inn; then he checked out the Kwaklahmyn trading village on the beach, the nearest caves, and the Grand Grotto, slowly exhausting his knowledge of Josh's bolt holes. His best guess was that Josh was still moving, not staying long enough in a single spot for them to overtake him: he did that sometimes. Eventually exhaustion, depression, and drink would catch up with the sailor and Josh would be forced to stop running and curl up someplace. As evening lengthened toward night, tired and hungry, Clemmerick headed for the kitchen. A big smile slid across his blunt features when he saw Becca standing in the middle of the room. Looking at her always made him feel good, kindled a warmth in his middle and a heat in his loins. He knew he had no chance at her favors; such an exquisite creature could never care for someone as huge and ugly as himself.

"You find Josh, Clemmerick?"

"Not yet. I got hungry. I need some dinner before I begin again."

Becca gestured at two servants. "Fix him some sandwiches," she told them. They started making normal size sandwiches.

"That's no way to feed an ogre!" Becca exclaimed, she pushed the servants aside and took over. She sliced a fresh loaf of bread lengthwise to make him four huge sandwiches, threw in some apples, put it all in a pail with some tomatoes and a shaker of salt.

"I'm afraid, if you want Beltrian beer, you'll have to get a couple of kegs from the north cellar. I don't sell enough of it to keep more than a couple of kegs here."

"Never a problem, Becca," Clemmerick grinned. As she turned away his eyes discretely ran from her ankles up. A sigh, almost as wistful as one of Josh's, slipped out.

Clemmerick took his pail, heading for the north cellar. The cellar was a left over from the old ramshackle storehouses Aejs had torn down to make space for the inn she built and connected to the Cock and Boar. A small storeroom now topped the cellar in the inn's northwest corner. Heavy oak stairs, reinforced to take Clemmerick's weight, led down. Barrels lined the four walls and tall racks of wine and assorted spirits formed three isles splitting the room.

As Clemmerick carefully eased his huge frame through the door and down the stairs, he heard weeping. Setting his pail aside, Clemmerick got onto his hands and knees, peering under and around the kegs and bottles. He spied Josh huddled in a corner where the empty kegs had been removed, two empty bottles of Iradrim Whiskey, a strong dwarven brew, lay near his feet, and he was struggling to open a third.

"Gods, Josh! You must have more booze than blood in your veins!"

"Not there yet," Josh mumbled as he wrested the cork from the bottle.

Clemmerick took the bottle away from him with gentle firmness. "Are you trying to kill yourself or something?"

"Aejs is dead," Josh sobbed, then he staggered up and headed for the rack of whiskey bottles. "You ken have that one, I take a different one."

"Aejs isn't dead," Clemmerick said patiently. "She was asleep when I carried her home."

"Was! So yer admitting she's dead." Josh pulled down two bottles, nearly got hit with a third that toppled as he released the rack. Clemmerick caught the rack and steadied it as it started to follow the bottle.

"I did not say that," Clemmerick sighed, settling cross-legged with his lunch pail lodged between groin and feet. As he lifted a keg of beer down without moving from his spot, Clemmerick had a feeling that, although it had been a long day, it would be a still longer night. He broke open the cask, lifted it to his lips and took a long drink, then started on his sandwiches.

"I love Aeijys," Josh sobbed.

"You ever tell her that?"

"Uh uh." Josh tried to shake his head, but the movement made his head throb.

"You ever going to tell her?"

"She's dead!"

"But just suppose for a moment that she was not dead," Clemmerick took a bite of his sandwich, chewing thoughtfully. "Would you ever tell her?"

"She's dead! You admit she's dead!" Josh suddenly shrieked.

"I did not say that. That's not what I meant. Answer my question, Josh, please. If I took you to her right now, would you tell her?"

"No!" Josh got the cork out and almost got the bottle to his mouth before Clemmerick snagged it.

Clemmerick now had two open bottles of whiskey and a half-finished keg of beer leaning on his legs. He had no idea where Josh had thrown the whiskey corks so he could not re-stopper them. An ingrained abhorrence of wasted food and drink assailed him. One thing was certain: he was not going to return the bottles to Josh, which left only one option: he drank them himself. The two bottles of whiskey hit harder than the entire keg of beer, and the ogre, unprepared for anything that strong, almost choked getting it down. He wondered how such a puny, wasted person as Josh could consume so much.

Whenever Clemmerick's attention strayed, Josh opened another bottle. Each time Clemmerick discovered this, he took the bottle away and drank it himself. And so the evening wore away into night.

Toward midnight a tiny form opened the cellar door and peered down. "What's going on?" Grymlyken asked, cautiously descending the stairs.

"Lilest frin'," Clemmerick spoke sloshily, "lilest frin'."

Grymlyken yelped and tried to run back up the stairs as Clemmerick reached for him. He had never seen a drunken ogre before and did not want to now. Clemmerick

caught him, lifted Grymlyken up, and thrust him into his shirt pocket. Clemmerick shoved a bottle into the pixie's face and Grymlyken was forced to drink or be drowned. Fortunately, more of the brew got on him than in him.

Grymlyken's eyes bulged, he choked, his throat and insides burned, his head went light and the world tilted. "Aejys still shlepin'," Grymlyken tried to clamp his hand over his mouth, aghast at his slurred speech and missed on the first attempt. "Ssssana ... lady ... ajan. Wants ev'won atter posts. Fendible. When Aejys wakes up."

Josh's head came up. "Wakes up? She's alive?"

"Din I jus say that?" Grymlyken asked.

Josh's mind slid away from the booze. Clarity slid in. He stood unsteadily. "I want ta see 'er."

"Can't go bustinin at this hour," Clemmerick said. He picked Josh up and climbed out of the cellar.

Soon they stood beneath Aejys' second story window. Clemmerick lifted Josh to the window so he could see in. The window was open to let in fresh air. Josh wormed through the curtains which settled around his head and shoulders like a pale veil. He squinted and watched closely.

Tamlestari rose, stretching her slender frame and yawning as Cassana replaced her in the chair by the bed. "Get me up, Amita Sana, when she wakes again."

Cassana nodded. "I will."

Neither of them noticed the Sot leaning in the window.

Josh straightened, freeing himself of the curtains. "Lil' frin is right. Jest sleepin'."

Clemmerick started to lower Josh, but he lost his balance, nearly falling out of the ogre's hands. Clemmerick clutched frantically, managing to keep from dropping him, but the jostling triggered Josh's stomach and he threw up all over himself, Grymlyken, and the ogre. Clemmerick's own stomach heaved in reaction, but he managed to restrain it for the moment. He staggered back toward the barn, desperately hoping to reach a discrete place to release it. Clemmerick wanted to bury his face in a pile of straw in a far corner, but did not make it before starting to vomit himself. Soon they were all sweat-drenched and retching in the night.

\* \* \* \*

Wilstryn Hornbow was a long, lanky figure in the black silk robes and breeches of an arms merchant with a patch over her dead eye. Assassins Guild healers, while

they could not restore the lost eye, had removed all signs of scarring from the old wound. She caught her long ink-black hair back in a brass clip. Her face was slightly beaky with a pointed, forward thrust nose, large white teeth with a slight overbite and small, narrow chin. She had always reminded Tagalong of a stork; an impression she used when she wished to be under-estimated. When she wanted to she could move with a lithe elegance that tended to draw attention. And like an exquisite chameleon she could shift, almost before all watching eyes, into a swan and back again into the duckling as mood or need required: all tools of the assassin. Wilstryn Hornbow left her companions at a nearby tavern and rode on to the castle gates alone. The guards knew Wilstryn, for she had been a regular at the castle since Aeijys brought her home for Solstice Break one year. She called to them that she was there to see Laeoli brye Rowan and was admitted.

Huge tapestries of hunting scenes hung over the walls of the great hall of Castle Rowan. Five chandeliers, larger around than cartwheels, lit the room. A small group of young nobles clustered at a table near the far end, armed and dressed for hunting. Two young men in short silken robes occupied the soft chairs, well-shaped legs drawn up and folded beneath them; beardless, for Sharani males had little or no body and facial hair. They listened, intently appreciative, to the young nobles' excited descriptions of the hunt which was liberally sprinkled with outright bragging. A youth with her hair shorn close to her head sat down on the chair arm, leaning suggestively against the younger male while describing the way her spear had entered the boar. He flushed and shrank away from her. She and the others laughed. A youth in red leather, standing near the back, frowned. She stepped forward and took the besieged young man by the hand. "Come on, little brother," she said, flinging a stinging glance at her companions. "Things are getting a bit rowdy for you here. Next thing you know they'll be passing you around like a party favor."

An older man leaned against a wall at the outside edge of the gathered youths, arms folded comfortably, smiling to herself at the way the younger ones ran on and on. She wore old stained hunting leathers and cuffed great boots, a hand axe rode against her hip thrust through her belt. Ladonys Dovane of Rowan was large, big-boned and heavily muscled. A shade less tall than her na'halaef, lifemate, Aeijys brye Rowan, she was far broader through the shoulders and had once lifted a fallen horse off its unfortunate rider.

As Wilstryn entered the great hall Ladonys spotted her. She detached herself from her companions, striding swiftly across the main hall. "What news, Wilstryn?"

"Where's Laeoli?"

"Up in her room changing. We hunted this morning," Ladonys told her. "Huh! If I hadn't been along some of these youngsters wouldn't have come home in one piece. Why that last boar was... Something's wrong, isn't it?"

Wilstryn looked uncomfortable. "I came myself because it isn't good. I want to tell

you both at the same time."

"Aejys?" Shadows gathered in the big woman's face, her lips thinning into a taut line.

"And Brendorn. I'm sorry, my old friend, to be bringing this news." Wilstryn regarded Ladonys gently as the woman's strong face went suddenly pale. "I only want to say this once, please."

"Both of them ... dear gods!" Ladonys hissed, mastering herself, "Come on then," Ladonys took Wilstryn's arm and walked her up the stairs to Laeoli's rooms in the west wing.

The slender girl stood in the center of the room buckling on her sword belt. Quiver and bow lay in the middle of her broad curtained bed beside the discarded hunting leathers. She fumbled with the belt, failing twice to get the metal tongue through the eye. Her face was flushed and streaked with wet as if from weeping, with a small cry she threw the belt, sword, and all across the room. The blade struck a mirror, shattering it.

Wilstryn threw a concerned look at Ladonys who shook her head, but there was no mistaking the worry and pain deepening steadily in the ha'taren's face.

"Yours first," Ladonys said.

Laeoli noticed them and straightened, pulling herself together with obvious effort. Wilstryn saw then that her godchild now stood taller than Ladonys, she would have Aejys' height, but with Ladonys' heavier build, giving her a heavy, yet raw-boned look, and she had her sire's dark green eyes.

"Ma'aram?" Laeoli asked, she saw the grave expression in their eyes and looked again from face to face. "What has happened?"

Wilstryn gripped the girl's shoulders and inclined her head. "Laeoli, your sire is dead and your ma'aram grievously wounded. She may not live."

"How?" Ladonys demanded, her voice heavy with anguish: it had been her idea to send Brendorn to fetch Aejys, certain that his woodcraft would get them through where others could not. She sank into a large chair, gripping the clawed arms hard enough to turn her knuckles white. "Were they on their way back?"

Wilstryn shook her head.

"Amita Margren did this, didn't she," Laeoli looked stunned, but in control, reminding Wilstryn of Aejys at that age. "Hasn't she done enough already?"

"Not while you live, she hasn't," Ladonys spat, turning to Wilstryn, "Go on."



"That renegade duelist, Farendarc, killed Brendorn. Aeajys killed Farendarc. My sources did not give me good odds on her recovery. Yes, Laeoli, I believe Margren hired Farendarc, but I do not have any hard evidence. She could not do it through the Guild, we owe Aeajys too much. Just a gut instinct and my own observations over the years. And no, they were not on their way back yet." Wilstryen pulled a folded parchment from her pocket. "My agent in Vorgensburg sent me this. It arrived a day ago. I rode a horse to death getting here. Judge for yourself." Wilstryen handed it to Laeoli. "The original is held by Cassana brye Odaren in your ma'aram's household."

Laeoli paled reading it. "Hell shitting damnation!" she hissed, passing the parchment to Ladonys, "You think M is Margren?"

"Yes. But as I said, I don't have the kind of hard evidence your grandma'aram would need to be convinced of Margren's treachery."

Laeoli moved to stand beside Ladonys, putting her hand on her wombmother's shoulder supportively. "Margren has tried to kill my ma'aram. Twice. At least."

"We suspect that, yes," the assassin said.

"I don't know what to do, but there must be something."

Wilstryen shook her head. "I don't know. I could take her out, but Aeajys would get blamed. Now, give me your news."

Laeoli faltered, then forced the words out, "Esreth, my wynderjyn, is dead."

"Dead?" Wilstryen's expression hardened in shock. "How?"

"Three days after the bonding..." Ladonys broke in, tears starting in her hard old eyes. "The mare's throat was torn out. There was no sound, no disturbance, none of the other animals, none of the hostlers, no one and nothing, knew anything, heard anything, saw anything until Laeoli found her."

"Gods!" The assassin hissed, gazing now at the door, "You should run away, Laeoli, my people can hide you."

"Not from Margren. I tried that once."

Wilstryen nodded. "Why hadn't she bonded earlier? I mean you both bonded at ten."

"Wilstryen, every year when it came time for Laeoli to ride with the others to the wynderjyn meadows, she fell ill. Finally Sonden moved her into the quarters next to his. He fixed her meals himself, everything – nothing left to chance. Laeoli did not become ill, instead she bonded."

"Poison?"

"I think so," Laeoli interjected grimly. "But none of the Readers could find it in my system."

"Something we haven't encountered before, then. You should have said something. My people know more about poisons than yours will ever know."

"I ... don't doubt it."

Wilstryn nodded. It figured that Margren would arrange that considering how vulnerable it would render Laeoli during the most intensely distracted period of bonding. "I think you should run away, Laeoli. If you could reach Doronar under your own powers I could hide you. We have mages there. But I dare not risk my people being caught with you in Shaurone."

"That would break grandma'aram's heart..."

"She would be worse hurt if you died at Margren's hands. I owe your ma'aram my life. I will die for you if need be, Laeoli. But I would rather not."

"I would never ask that of you."

Wilstryn smiled thinly. "Then run away, Laeoli. At the Arris River cut your hand and leave your bloody shirt there. Let them think an animal got you. That will stop them searching."

"We have discussed this before, Laeoli," Ladonys told her, "You must run away. But it must be arranged so as to discourage a full scale search for you."

"But people ... Grandma'aram will blame my Amita."

"If she does it will suit me fine!" Ladonys snarled. "It's about time Margren's actions caught up with her!"

"Possibly, but I doubt we could be that fortunate." Wilstryn sat on a low table, drawing one leg up and propping her elbow on it, "If you follow my instructions, she'll think an animal got you."

"More and more, child, I think this is the only way." Ladonys rose and clasped Laeoli to her chest. "You may be all I have left and I want you safe above all else."

"I must think about this..." Laeoli responded uncertainly.

"I will contact you, Ladonys, when the opportune time presents itself." Wilstryn rose and went to the window, leaning out the sill. "Laeoli, think about this. Think hard." Then Wilstryn Hornbow jumped out the second story window. Laeoli gasped

and went to look. The Assassins Guild Chieftain had vanished as if she had never been there.

\* \* \* \*

Torches burned in black iron sconces along the walls of the circular Great Hall of Dragonshead. Branches of candles sat on all of the tables scattered throughout amid the chairs and couches, producing a garish light and throwing patterns of shifting shadow into every crevice and nook. Two high backed chairs sat upon a central dais. Many of the sa'necari enjoyed public feeding on nibari, and private when it was mere meat and wine. The sa'necari preferred the Great Hall for public feeding, because of its size, which allowed them to display the quality of privately owned stock, while holding discussions and conversations. In essence, the Great Hall served as an orgy room – although Mephistis had so far refused to grant his sa'necari a true one.

Isranon paused at the edge and judged the room. Rose belonged to the common herd, which Mephistis had smuggled in over the years to satisfy the needs of the lower ranks. Sometimes the upper echelons fed from that herd also. He could not bring himself to ask favors of Mephistis. Instead, he simply worried whenever one of the others chose Rose. If he had had rank and power, which he would never have because of his beliefs – his determination not to cross the line into the darkness – then asking for her would have been a small thing.

He went down the three tiers into the chamber to cross it, watching for her. Two sa'necari rose from chairs and approached him. One was Bodramet, a sturdy mon who wore his hair slicked back and woven into dozens of tiny braids at the base of his skull, and who was rumored to be second in power only to Mephistis. The other was Troyes, a sa'necari of middle rank and power, lighter haired and skinned than Bodramet. They intercepted him in the middle.

Bodramet regarded Isranon speculatively, running a finger along the youth's cheek. "Do you play nibble games, Isranon? Troyes is of the opinion that you do."

Troyes grinned, moving closer to Isranon.

Isranon sucked a breath through his nostrils. "No."

"That's not the rumors, Isranon," Troyes said. "We've all heard you feed the vampires. That you bend over for Dane."

"You're a fine looking young male," Bodramet continued to stroke Isranon's face.

Isranon stepped forward and shoved between them, his heart starting to hammer. Troyes caught him by the arm. Isranon drew his knives and spun, putting one to Troyes's throat and the other at his gut. "Let me be."

Troyes's eyes lowered to the blades and then lifted to Isranon's face. "Another time, perhaps?" He released the youth.

Isranon sheathed the blades and strode away, refusing to run or give the smallest sign that they had shaken him. Their laughter followed him through the room. Isranon found Rose with Dane in an adjacent chamber. He hungered for a taste of his Rose, but the encounter with Bodramet and Troyes had left his stomach clenched up and a revulsion for what he was lodged in his throat. Dane walked them to the circle of rooms his own people occupied. It required two glasses of wine before Isranon could relax enough to feed from Rose and, when the little nibari fell asleep, Dane had his own nibari put her to bed while he and Isranon talked.

"My father did not believe in violence," Isranon said, allowing Dane to pour him a third glass. "The Dark Brothers did not believe in it. Nor in vengeance."

"Yet, I saw you draw those blades you wear on Troyes."

Isranon looked up sharply at Dane. "You were watching?"

Dane nodded. "You know how to use them. We've practiced together."

"My godfather Nevin is lycan. Every time we had to scatter and flee, I was sent to Nevin in Claw Redhand's valley."

"I've heard of it. It's a waystation for sa'necari sneaking through the Sharani-occupation zone and then south. I've never been there." Dane opened another bottle, refilled his glass, and settled opposite Isranon. He leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. "You should ask Mephistis to send you there."

"No. I am my prince's mon." Isranon met Dane's eyes squarely.

"You do not belong here among the monsters."

"I am a monster. I was born a monster." Isranon's voice became devoid of emotion. "I keep my father's teachings as far as I am able. What happened in the hall... That is merely their nature, like lions of the forest. It does not have to be my nature."

"Why not?" Dane persisted, trying to drag it back around.

"Because all of the Dawnhand's lineage are different."

"You tell yourself you are different, but are you really? What happened to your sister?"

Isranon's eyes dropped. "They made her one of the monsters and she stepped into the flames."

"You mean she killed herself?"

"Yes."

"Was she living or undead?" Dane thought Isranon was far too young for what he saw in the youth's eyes.

"Undead. They killed her, knowing she would rise..." Isranon sucked air, seeming every bit his mere seventeen years, all vulnerability. "Should I rise or somehow be forced into the rites, I will step into the flames as honor demands – as she did." Isranon hesitated, his expression troubled. "Should I perish here, Dane, I would judge it a kindness if you would carry word of it to Nevin. And tell him I died well."

"I swear it, Isranon." Dane clasped the youth tightly in his arms and then released him. "If I had had a son of my body before I was turned ... Isranon, I would have felt honored for him to have been like you."

#### CHAPTER FOUR. RAVENS' NEST

Tagalong entered her sixth tavern of the night, the Salmon Moose. It was little more than a barrel room with unopened kegs stacked along the walls on three sides and a narrow bar for dispensing from the open kegs behind it. She settled herself at a table near the bar, and shouted for a tankard

"Ale." Her voice boomed over the noises of the patrons. The alewife came herself, drying her hands on a rough apron. The tavern was lit by candles thrust into wine bottles coated in wax drippings at the tables. It reeked of smoke, sweat and the unwashed bodies which crowded around the tables and spread over the benches.

The dwarf watched a gnarled gnome of a mon approach the table next to hers that four young stalwarts occupied, moving with an arthritic limp. He wore crude brown garments of homespun cloth, and carried no weapons that Tagalong could see. Nothing in his appearance predicted what happened next and it made Tagalong blink to see it. The moment his hand touched the seat, the four stalwarts made their apologies and left. The gaffer graciously accepted custody of the table. The alewife, seeing him, abandoned her customers to personally greet him, set out three tankards and a pitcher as if expecting others to join the old mon. Tagalong tried to focus on her brew, but everything about this set off interesting speculations which drew her gaze back.

The gaffer watched Tagalong surreptitiously around the edges of his tankard. Then he pulled out his pipe, stuffed and lit it. As the smoke rose to wreath his head, the two thugs from the night before the duel appeared and sat down beside him. One of them sported bruises where his face had met the wall when Tagalong tossed him across the room. The other one saw Tagalong and nodded to her pleasantly,

mystifying the dwarf. She suspected his stomach would still be sore from the poke she had given him.

Her thoughts turned to the gaffer and a small satisfied smile stole briefly across Tagalong's lips. For the third time that night the gaffer sat watching her. Either he was having her watched or knew her habits well enough to anticipate which tavern she would try next. Whichever, it showed her that his interest was piqued. And he had to be Assassins Guild. No doubt of that remained in her mind. Each time, he chose a table a little closer to hers. She interpreted his unexpected nearness as an invitation to approach him.

Tagalong picked up her tankard and sauntered over. She leaned into his face, shoving five gold double gryphons to his edge of the table, more money than most people saw in a year. She raised her fingers from the coins and pressed lightly against his chest. "Tell your red feathered friends that Gaertrudin Angtraden is hiring at good wages, especially if they rode with Jon Dawn," she gave him her true name, rather than the nickname she had picked up in childhood. All talk at the table stopped when they heard Angtraden: the Angtraden were the mightiest and wealthiest of dwarf clans. Even their poorest relations had more wealth and prestige than the average merchant. Tagalong wished suddenly that she had been giving it out from the start. She abandoned her tankard on his table and walked off.

Tagalong stepped out into the torchlit streets. She could neither hear nor see anyone, yet she knew they were there. The assassins were a cautious, secretive guild. She had just thrown the gauntlet in their face and they would have to respond. She had walked just three blocks before six tall shapes detached themselves from the shadows. Tagalong moved back and half turned, another group moved behind her. She pulled her hammer and watched them. The only way out was the alley to her right. That must be where the gaffer was. She angled toward it without taking her eyes from the myn. When she reached the shadows she spun and came face to face with the gaffer and his two companions.

The gaffer no longer limped. He stood straight as a sword blade and twenty years dropped from his manner and visage. He looked almost Sharani and oddly familiar: lean and lanky with a beaky nose and an overbite. "Now what would an Angtraden be wantin' a red raven for?" he asked her, taking her measure as he spoke. "If ya be one. Eh?"

Tagalong grinned in a jaunty manner, hooking the hammer on her shoulder. "I've a one-eyed friend in Armaten who always said if I ever needed a certain kind of help ta buy a red raven."

"You be knowin' her a long time, eh?" the gaffer asked.

"Since childhood in Armaten. She had two eyes then."

The gaffer grinned back at Tagalong now. "Uh huh. An' what color be the eye she

lost?"

Tagalong's grin broadened. "Blue."

The old gaffer gave her a slow sidewise nod. "an' the one she still has?"

"Green. Aejs and I were with her when she lost the blue one. A grievin' ma'aram hired her ta do fer a merchant traffickin' in children. We stumbled into it by accident."

"Then you be Tagalong Smith, not Gaertrudin Angraden."

The two swordsmyn relaxed at the name.

Tagalong took her cue from them and returned the hammer to her belt. "They're both me. I know my folks wish they weren't," she said, rueful yet unrepentant. Then in an exaggerated voice with every vowel precisely pronounced she said, "Gaertrudin! You run with the common folk and gutterscrews. They will stain your reputation and leave their mark upon you! Yah, uh huh."

The gaffer thought for a moment, "Roll up your sleeve."

Tagalong didn't need to ask which sleeve. She pushed up her left one to reveal a long burn scar.

The gaffer nodded. "Y'ar who ya say. Ya reached across th' edge of a forge ta save her. Wilstryn still be tellin' that tale."

Tag looked a little embarrassed. It wasn't the first time she had gotten inadvertently burned in a smithy and tended to take such things for granted.

"I be grateful fer it. Wilstryn be me daughter. Tell me tha task an' I be tellin' ya the price."

"It's too big for ya, gaffer. I want ta speak ta the Grand Master. Aejs wants two cadres. Preferably veterans of Jon Dawn's Legion."

A low whistle of astonishment escaped one of the two bodyguards.

"I don't know about that," the gaffer sounded doubtful.

"There's a rogue Assassins' Guild in Shaurone. Farendarc was a member."

The gaffer's two guards glanced sharply at each other.

"That be explainin' a lot," the gaffer said thoughtfully. "Rogue guild. Someone's been hittin' our people in Shaurone, Doronar and Iradrim."

"Pattern radiates outta Rowanslea. Right?"

The bodyguards exchanged another set of glances and the gaffer nodded. "I'll set up tha meetin'. Be ready ta leave at moment's notice."

\* \* \* \*

Early the next afternoon, after catching up on some sleep, Tagalong knocked on Aeijys' door, then opened it and peeped around. Aeijys was sitting up, propped against pillows, a bed table across her lap, dipping slices of crusty bread into a meaty broth and eating slowly. The lapsed paladin wore a loosely wrapped brown dressing gown, the left sleeve hung empty, the shoulder pulled around the bandaged arm, which Tamlestari had strapped to her side. She looked tired, but the color was returning to her face.

A vase filled with fragrant wildflowers and ferns sat on the table beside the bed. It reminded Tagalong of Brendorn who had loved to bring Aeijys flowers and fruit from his garden.

Aeijys followed Tagalong's eyes to the vase. "Tamlestari. Brendorn told her how I liked them."

"Not the same," Tagalong said.

"There's a part of her that reminds me of him."

Tagalong shrugged. "I found 'em, Aeijys. Gaffer's arrangin' a meetin'."

"Good," Aeijys replied, "It moves fast then. I want to get out of here in a fortnight."

"Ya sure? I mean..."

"It's a long way home, Tag. I promised Brendorn I would be there before the first month of winter so I could see his gardens. Hungry?"

Tag nodded and a gesture from Aeijys sent a servant scurrying for a tray of food and drink.

"Ya sure yar gonna be strong enuf?"

"No forced marches," Aeijys waved her good hand at the servants to remove her bed table and food. "But a steady pace."

"If ya say so, Aeijys."

"Can you get my pipe, Tag? Help me get it loaded and light it. I don't think I can



handle it one-handed."

Tagalong sprang up, retrieved the pipe, and got Aejs settled back on her pillows smoking thoughtfully.

The servant returned with a plate of fried cod, a bowl of stew and a dish of potatoes, mushrooms and onions in a heavy buttery sauce just as Tagalong liked it.

They ate and talked and smoked until weariness and returning pain faded the color from Aejs' face.

"Hurts again?" Tagalong asked, reaching for the holadil on a nearby table.

Aejs nodded. "I have a lot to do yet, Tag. I'll take some later."

"Heals faster if it don't hurt. Least that's what I been told." Tagalong poured a measure of holadil into a glass. "Give it a couple a days more fore ya start gettin' hinky 'bout it."

Aejs gave Tagalong a sidewise glance, wanting to argue, but not finding the energy for it. A tired edge crept into her voice, "So be it. Perhaps I need a smoke and a nap more than anything else right now."

Tagalong smiled, brought over the holadil and gave it to Aejs.

Aejs drank it, leaned back. "I need ... those gray mice ... Tag," she said, her voice going worn and dozy. She handed the pipe to the dwarf, "Don't. Forget. The gray mice. Thieves best at ... finding ... hidden stuff ... proof of what ... Margren's doing." Then she slid into sleep.

"Hunf," Tagalong snorted as she turned to leave, "Margren's not gonna live long enuf ta say hello, I have anything to say about it."

\* \* \* \*

Cassana sat at a large table in Aejs' study with pen and paper. Becca sat near her looking at maps spread across one end. Sunlight streamed through the open windows. A cool breeze off the ocean toyed with the bright curtains and curled the maps. Becca slammed a crystal paperweight down on the papers before they could scatter over the room. Cassana glanced up at the sound, her left eyebrow raised in question.

"The breeze was blowing everything," Becca explained, indicating the paperweight. She wore a pair of black cotton pants. They chafed the insides of her thighs until she wanted to claw the irritated skin off. Worse, she felt naked in them, as if her legs were revealed to the world. But she stubbornly wore them and resisted the urge to change back into her skirts.

Cassana nodded, returning to her papers. "We will take almost the same route back that we took getting here," Cassana said, sealing a letter with her signet. "It will take us rather close to your parents' village. Would you like to send them a letter? I assume there must be someone in your village who can read."

"The priest of Willodarus."

"Start thinking about what you wish to say and when I am done here I will take it down. You might also want to send gifts."

"Who is that one to?" Becca asked, noticing that Cassana wrote now in a different script than before.

"Brendorn's mother. She is of Valdren blood. We will pass through Vallimrah on the last leg of this journey."

"You must know a lot of languages. Not just Engla and Sharani..."

"I wanted to be a scribe, translating and copying manuscripts. But my ma'aram was the Mar'ajan of Yarrendar, Shaurone's southern province. So I was trained as ha'taren, a paladin of Aroana. But I ran off without finishing the training."

"Ran off? But I thought you followed the fireborn..."

"Kalestari Desharen, Tamlestari's ma'aram. Same thing. But that was long ago and far away," Cassana sealed another letter and regarded Becca for a moment. "My ma'arams died in the war, otherwise I would probably have been forced back into training. My sister, Geoa, is a far more reasonable person. Now there are other things I need to think about. Will you go see if the couriers are ready?"

\* \* \* \*

Mephistis regarded Margren thoughtfully, leaning back against the wall with his arms folded. She had arrayed herself in an outland dress, burgundy with a snug bodice over silver that showed through the embroidered slashings along the sleeves and the neck. He wondered how much of the recent trouble that had been caused for Isranon had originated with her petty jealousies. Dane had told him of several confrontations between Isranon and others that the vampire had witnessed. Can Margren be encouraging this? Or do they simply smell his vulnerability? The fact that he has not crossed the line and made a transition that frequently happens at thirteen, the full flowering of adult power through the rites of mortgiefan?

"You must find more opportunity to participate in the rites, Margren," Mephistis said.

"There are many demands on my time, my love," she responded, turning her body

to play with his gaze as she settled on the couch. "My ma'aram has been demanding my attention."

Margren shifted still more, presenting her breasts to him at a provocative angle. It made Mephistis de Waejonan suspicious. He loved Margren, as much as he was capable of love, but he never deluded himself concerning her. There was something dangerously unstable in Margren's nature. It both drew him and kept him cautious. So he never allowed himself to become predictable, shifting between harsh and soft with her on a whim. So long as she did not transgress his boundaries, he would sympathize and reassure, but the prince would not tolerate the behaviors that her ma'aram indulged – at least when she tried to play them on him. Sometimes he wondered, as he did then, whether the fondness he felt for Isranon was deeper than what he felt for Margren. "You are now the only one of my allies in the noble houses here who has not completed the change into sa'necari. For the great rites I have planned to bring this realm to its knees at Winter Solstice, you must have joined their ranks."

"I want to..." Margren hesitated. "Juldrid..."

Mephistis shoved away from the wall and crossed to her side. "Surely, you are not letting her petty terrors and insecurities come between you and the power you crave? Letting her come between us?"

"No, of course not."

He stroked her cheek, loosened her bodice, and brought forth one of her breasts. Mephistis nuzzled it, licking along the vein. She shivered in anticipation. When he broke the skin and drank, her face suffused in pleasure and she wrapped around him. Mephistis lifted his mouth from her breast and kissed her deeply, leaving a smear of her own blood across her lips. He raised her in his arms and carried her to the bedroom. When he laid her down, she started to undress. Mephistis stopped her. He shoved her dress up, opened his pants and lifted himself out. The prince forced himself inside her before she was entirely ready. Margren cried out and then relaxed, surrendering herself up to him – he had long ago taught her not to resist when he decided to make their coupling a statement of his dominance.

\* \* \* \*

It went faster than Tagalong expected. She had forgotten how swiftly the Guild could move in an emergency. On the second night after she met Old Gaffer Hornbow, Tagalong stood on a sandy strip of beach an hour's ride north of Vorgensburg. The full moon reached its zenith, giving the midnight hour a bright glow, gilding the golden sands and the cresting waves with icy silver. Her companions watched the sky intently. Tagalong looked up from time to time, but soon tired of craning her neck.

"There she be," said the gaffer.

A tremendous flying shape circled out of the darkness and hung outlined against the moon for a moment before settling to the sand.

Tagalong's heart hammered and her pulse rushed at the sight of the great roc. The gaffer smiled and clapped her on the shoulder. "It be a big'un. Raised it meself. Archenwyrms got the mama. We rescued the hatchlings. Bout a year ago. Maybe two."

"Where?" Tagalong asked, thinking about the archenwyrms Aejys, Josh, and she had killed two years past down the coast by the Blowholes: The archenwyrms whose treasure financed everything they did.

"Blowholes," the gaffer answered, watching her closely. "Guild don't steal. Matter'a honor. We know ya kilt that wyrm what ate the mama."

Tagalong gave him a lopsided smile.

The gaffer walked with her to the roc. The giant bird lowered its head and rubbed against the gaffer, making small crooning noises.

"Ah, me darlin', me darlin'," said the gaffer scratching the huge head. "Yes, papa loves ya, Bright Eyes. Yes, he does."

The roc shivered in delight.

"Now ya gotta let papa's friend get aboard."

Bright Eyes stretched out, laying his head and shoulders on the ground. Tag could see the riding straps and saddles now. A slender young man seated in the forward saddle held the reins, he extended his hand, and with help from the gaffer they got Tagalong into the rear saddle between the roc's shoulders.

The young man secured Tagalong with riding straps so ingeniously devised that even if the roc turned over in the air the riders would not fall off.

Bright Eyes straightened, ran three steps toward the ocean, wings spread. He gave them a snap and they lifted into the air. They flew out over the ocean, then Bright Eyes, anticipating the tug of the reins, veered back making for a point in the far northeast chasing the dawn to the Creeyan Mountains and the fortress of the Grand Master.

\* \* \* \*

Carved from the living rock by dwarves, Ishladrim castle thrust upward in harsh geometric patterns, rising in tier upon tier of pinnacles and walls and courtyards like structured insanity. A plateau ringed with spires formed the Grand Master's personal

courtyard. Huge flying creatures of all descriptions swooped and circled as they descended to the fortress, creatures of heaven and creatures of hell in an unimaginable flock: rocs, simurgs, fire-breathing perytons, sundrakes, and pegasi. Those Tagalong could set name to, but there were others, some of such terrifying visage that the stalwart dwarf shuddered and looked away. Tagalong had never seen such a tremendous assemblage of monstrous flying creatures in her entire life. They came in from all directions bearing the Grand Master's chieftains to this urgent meeting on which lay, perhaps, the fate of their guild itself as well as the needs of Aejys Rowan. They came to hear Tagalong and make plans regarding the rogue guild.

Bright Eyes dove fearlessly through the host, alighting in the Grand Master's courtyard.

Columns forested the great central hall, supporting three-stories high groin vaults and ribbed arches that merged one into the other in curving conchoidal points. Three inns the size of the Cock and Boar, courtyard quad, stable and all could fit easily within the single chamber carved into the womb of the mountain. The chieftains and their entourages spread through the chambers reminding Tagalong of the way the levies had gathered at Rowanslea in a sea of banners, livery and glittering arms.

On a golden dais wrought in a pattern of abstracted peacocks, their tails radiant with gemstones sat the Grand Master, Takhalme Gee. He wore a deep-sleeved gold velvet aba over a long umber silk caftan and loose trousers. A neatly trimmed, sharply pointed black goatee covered the cleft in his strong chin. His warm brown skin was clear and perfect, his eyes luminous black orbs that revealed nothing of his thoughts. His three high Lord Lieutenants flanked him: Gylorean Galee of the Nordrei, one of the five races of high sylvans; Hanadi Majios the nomad; and the black-skinned giant Mohanja Raam from the jungles of the southern continent, Jedrua.

Hanadi Majios of the Chirkahn Euzadi, a lithe dark woman of average height clad in loose-legged trousers tied at the ankles and a mid-calf tunic with sides split to her waist, sat with her hands folded atop one knee and her head propped on her hands. A huge steel gray beast wrapped around her back. It rose and stretched as Tagalong approached the peacock throne. The dwarf gasped audibly at a legend made flesh: a shadow hound from the demon-haunted lands beyond the Katal Escarpment. The beast, Brundarad by name, stood twelve hands at the shoulder, wiry steel dust coat, deep chested, raw-boned, built as much for speed as power. Two ivory horns curled tightly above its long, hanging ears. A long blunt muzzle extended from its squarish head. Two emerald eyes gleamed with intelligence.

Beside Hanadi and just a little in front and to the left of the throne stood a huge black-skinned Jedruan nearly as tall as Clemmerick, or so he appeared to Tagalong at that moment. Mohanja Raam leaned on a halberd, his broad featured face serene and thoughtful. He wore a lionskin wrapped around his waist over his trousers. The heavy muscles of his huge chest and arms, bare and uncovered, looked capable of

challenging even the ogre.

The slender Nordrei, Gylorean Galee, nut-brown skinned, large pointed ears dramatically exposed by the sweep of her black hair, draped herself across the left hand of the throne, whispering in the Master's ear and nodding at Tag.

"Tagalong Smith, also known as Gaertrudin Angtraden, you have long been known to us," said the Grand Master. "You have rescued and succored members of our Guild on more than one occasion, for this we are in your debt. What is it that you wish of us?"

Tagalong bowed gracefully with a sweep of her hand touching forehead, lips, and heart. She schooled the sloppiness from her speech, addressing him in tones that befitted a courtier at a ruler's court. "Your Majesty, I welcome this opportunity to meet with you for the first time. I would that it were on a happier note." She pulled a parchment from her waistband. "This is a copy of a document found on the slain duelist, Farendarc."

"You may approach," the Grand Master told her. When she reached the first step Mohanja Raam took the paper from her and passed it to Takhalme Gee. He read for a moment. Tagalong sensed a tautness come into his bearing though nothing showed on his face. "We have been plagued of late by someone assassinating our assassins. You know who these people are? Where to find them?"

"I am fairly certain that this M is Margrenan brye Rowan."

"To hit that one would bring a war upon us."

"To hit her followers, root out her minions, I think would not," Tagalong replied. "The rival guild must be stopped, do you not agree?"

"I agree, Tagalong Smith. You know where to find these citadels?"

"Not yet, but once we arrive in Rowanslea, I will find them quickly."

"And what is your offer, then?"

Tagalong took a pouch from her side, handed it to Mohanja Raam, which he in turn presented to the Grand Master.

Takhalme Gee poured the gems out onto his palm and the room came alive with whispers at the wealth of flawless rubies and emeralds, gems such as he loved best. "How are my people to earn this?"

"Aejys wants two score of your folk in various guises to accompany her to Rowanslea. At least half of them should be lancers. I know some of your people fought in the Great War. Aejys wants veterans of Jon Dawn's Legion."

Takhalme nodded. "So. There is more?"

"Yes. When this job is done I will distribute another pouch just as rich among those of your people who accompany us. But I want this as an alliance. In exchange for my helping you locate the citadels of the Gold Ravens, your people will use all of their skills and knowledge as assassins to prevent Margren's people from getting to Aejys Rowan and her daughter. My gray mice and I will search for the proof of Margren's guilt. That way Kaethreyn will not blame Aejys or take the field against us. Until I give the word, no one hits Margren."

"That is an ambitious goal. We will need to discuss this amongst our Eldari. You have a friend in the north foyer who will take you to the rooms we have arranged in one of the inns. You have the freedom of the city, but not the palace. Nor are you to leave our city until we send you home. We will send for you when we are ready."

\* \* \* \*

"Tag! Yo Tag!" A familiar voice caused the dwarf to turn just as she entered the foyer. The walls were covered in decorative tiles depicting stylized birds and animals in gardens of vivid colors amid flowers that bloomed only in the mind.

Wilstryn Hornbow rose from a mahogany settee. She was dressed all in black leather with a black bearskin cloak. A broad, polished ebony clip caught her dark hair back. She crossed the room in three long strides and dropped to her knees to hug Tagalong.

"Heard Aejys got hurt," Wilstryn said casually as she straightened.

"Farendarc got dead," Tagalong growled low. "Aejys is healin'. We're movin' out in a fortnight."

"Farendarc," Wilstryn's mouth screwed up in a look of distaste as if something foul had passed her lips, "I wish I'd been there to spit on his corpse. He killed three of my people. Took them out one at a time in the course of a single night. Don't know how he knew where to find them."

"Wilstryn," Tag said, "You lose anyone I know?"

Wilstryn's good eye hooded, her lips thinned and she grew pensive, pulling in on herself, visibly fighting her own inner demons.

Tagalong reached out and took her hands, "He got one'a the kids, didn't he?"

Wilstryn nodded, she leaned against the wall, her face turned away from Tagalong's, and said in a voice gone strangely soft and gravelly, "My youngest... My son, Sohkoran. He was just ten years old, Tag. My girls took him to the harvest fair.

Somehow Farendarc separated him from them, threw him across a horse, and escaped. Tag, you know how rare sons are among my people! I got six daughters and then Sohkoran."

"I know," Tagalong acknowledged.

"What kind of ass-horned gutterscrew would raise something like that!" Wilstryn snarled low.

"He's a Coleth," a deep male voice intruded on their conversation, "I thought you both knew." A short blond human not much taller than Tagalong, clean-shaven, blue-eyed, broad chested and small hipped in blue robes stood beside them.

Tagalong let out a yelp and grabbed him. "Jon Dawn! Ya damned sting-assed mud-dauber! Where've ya been all these years?"

"I run a caravansary out of Tovante these days," he told her. "Remember Aevrina Coleth's two bastards? Ma'aramlasah unknown, sire unknown? She had them recognized at the Saer'ajan's court. Year before the war."

Wilstryn's expression grew savage even as the color faded from her cheeks. "Then his father was..."

"Waejontori, that's the rumor anyway. One source during the war claimed the father and 'lasah were either banewitches or sa'necari," Jon Dawn supplied, looking up to regard the tall chieftain. "I must have missed part of the conversation. You look like you need a drink."

For the first time Tagalong Smith saw the assassin chieftain deeply shaken. Tagalong seized the woman's arm. "There someplace we can sit and have a drink? Jon's right, ya need one."

"I have a house on the third tier down, northwest side," Jon told them.

"Good enuf!" Tagalong replied, steering Wilstryn behind him.

Jon Dawn guided Tagalong out of the keep to the narrow streets of the lower sections of the city of Havensword. Crowds thronged the avenues and lanes, drawn together from dozens of entourages now dismissed for the day while the chieftains met with the Grand Master. Jon Dawn turned down an alley. Stray dogs bolted from their diggings as the three passed. Now and again children peered at them from behind iron-barred gardens. Jon Dawn led them down one twisting way and up another, his quick stride daring Wilstryn's long legs to keep up with his shorter ones and forcing Tagalong to trot.

At a small iron gated yard Jon Dawn pulled a key from his pocket and let them in. The gate creaked slightly, announcing them to a small herd of dogs of various sizes



from tiny to huge.

"Jon? That you, honey?" A deep, rich timbered, female voice greeted them.

"It's me, all right, Nara," He answered.

She stepped into the garden from the kitchen door, wiping her hands on her apron; a large, round woman who easily made more than two of John, round faced and red complexioned with guileless blue eyes that appeared ready for whatever pleasures she could capture in life. Nara caught him in her arms and swung him off the ground. "Ah! My wee Jon! I knew ye'd be back again when wind of this shindig got out."

Jon nodded, "Nara! Nara! We'll have some days now. But for the nonce my friends and I need a private space and a solid bottle."

"I've stocked the liquor cabinet, my man!" Nara said with a wink and kissed his mouth hungrily. He responded for a long moment, and then turned, leading Wilstryn and Tagalong into the house. Tagalong wondered what it was that Jon saw in plump women, for she had never seen him with a thin one. They settled into an upstairs study. Jon got the small fire in the hearth blazing, and then poured out a double Iradrim whiskey for Wilstryn and wine for himself and Tagalong.

Tagalong pulled the letter out of her pocket and slid it across to Wilstryn. "Now give me all ya know, old friend."

"I have part of it, myself," Jon Dawn said, pulling two small disks on thongs out of his pocket and laying them in front of the others.

Tagalong picked one up. It was the three Rowans of Rowanslea held in the claws of a dragon. "Where'd ya get this?"

"I had three of them," he said, pushing one toward Wilstryn. "One is now with the Grand Master."

Wilstryn's face turned to steel when she saw it, her voice grew soft, an edge creeping into it. "Waejontor and Rowanslea? It makes sense. After Sohkoran was taken, his sisters and half my units wanted to go after Farendarc."

"Sohkoran? He's your youngest right?" Jon Dawn put in, "He must be getting big now."

Wilstryn took the whiskey and downed in one swallow. "He's dead."

Jon Dawn sucked in his breath. "I'm sorry." He glanced from Tagalong to Wilstryn and back again. "How?"

"Farendarc," Tagalong hissed, signaling him to wait.

Wilstryan continued. "I allowed my two eldest daughters to track Farendarc, but not to engage. They followed him to Dragonshead above Rowan Castle and lost him. A week ago they found Sohkoran on the north bluff above Dragonshead. He'd been dead for several days. Whoever Farendarc served had butchered my child."

"Ya think it's Margren?"

"I know it's Margrenan Rowan. In my gut I know it. I can't prove it. We found nine other bodies butchered in the same way. Sohkoran was a touch healer, his powers just starting to show. The Mage School at Sharatier had accepted him for training. Sohkoran would have been the first lifemage in my family. Imagine that..." Wilstryan's voice caught. "A lifemage from a long line of life takers... The three we could identify were touch healers too. Lifemages of great power. My guess is they all were. Why is beyond me."

Tagalong nodded, her face grim yet thoughtful. "I've never lied ta ya, Wilstryan. I wish I could now. But I can't. Sohkoran and the others... Waejontoris probably's got their souls bottled up. That's how they make baneblades ya know ... tie a soul onto it. Where'd ya find that thing, Jon?"

"It turned up in my caravansary. Mon traded three of them for a drink," Jon poured a second round. "Said he got it off some trolls attacked the caravan he was with near the ruins of Aralyn. Cut them to pieces before the Beltrian Guard arrived."

Wilstryan inhaled sharply, her mouth twisting as she tried to fight down the expression of her grief. "Sohkoran! Aroana, sweet God! What do I do, Tag? I know nothing of such sorceries."

Jon moved to stand beside Wilstryan, slipping an arm around her shoulders. Tagalong stood in her chair and hugged Wilstryan across the table. As they closed around her in sympathy, Wilstryan slipped one of the two charms into her pocket. She turned into Tagalong's embrace and knocked the other one onto the floor. Later when Jon looked for them he would just assume that the second had gotten knocked off also and would be found eventually.

"If it's any comfort," Jon said, "I have never heard of them using children's souls on those blades..."

"Aejys and me, we'll take care of the Waejontori." She tapped the letter. "We think Margren's leagued with him or her. Whether the Mar'ajan Kaethreyn will agree that this proves it remains to be seen."

"What can I do?" Wilstryan asked.

"Aejys is lookin' ta hire about two score of yar people. Between ya, me, and the doorpost I'm lookin' ta make an alliance. There's a rogue guild in Rowanslea. I help

ya get them, ya help me get Margren. Aejys ain't in on this last bit. I'd appreciate if ya didn't bring it up ta her."

"And Sohkoran?"

"If that gritchin demon-witch got his soul I'll set it free. Father of Stone be my witness!"

"I'm a long way away these days," Jon Dawn said, "but if I can do something, just send word."

"Thank you, my true friends," Wilstryn said, "My very true friends. I dream constantly of Sohkoran. I hardly sleep. But it will be better now. So what can I do to help you, Tag?"

"Support me when I see the Grand Master, and, if he permits, lend me some back up in Shaurone when and if I need it."

"So be it. We kept all the things we could take off those bodies, rings and such, maybe you could identify them or know someone who could?"

"Cassana Odaren be my guess for gettin them figured out."

"Can you get them to her?"

"She's with Aejys right now."

They sat late into the evening around a fireplace. Nara brought dinner up. When they finished eating, Tag asked, "Jon, what became of Aevrina Coleth's second son?"

"No one knows what became of Mephistis. But there's a rumor she had three."

\* \* \* \*

Isranon sat upon a square of stone surrounded on three sides by bushes. The concealment comforted him, lending him an illusion of safety. If he allowed himself to think about it, then he would lose the illusion, so the youth worked hard at maintaining it. His father used to tell him that so long as he could play that flute and enjoy it he would never become a monster. He built castles in his mind to wall out his awareness of what went on around him. So he sat and played. The first songs were sad and troubled, but slowly the music lifted him out of it and the notes changed until they were as pure and sweet as birds.

The sounds of a lute came from nearby and Isranon raised an eyebrow at that, but did nothing. He continued to play and now he could hear the minstrel coming nearer. He saw, from the corner of his eye, Juldrid settle near him and he gave her a small nod. Isranon did not want to frighten her away by attempting conversation: She

knew what he was, and he knew how she felt about sa'necari: she hated them. They sat and played together in silence until it began to be dark, then she rose and left him without speaking.

\* \* \* \*

Aejys opened her eyes. At first glance there was no one in the room. She rolled onto her good side and tilted herself out of bed. A wave of dizziness hit her and she hesitated, letting it subside. Then she reached for her clothes draped over a nearby chair. She clutched at her shoulder and arm, doubling over with a sharp intake of breath.

"Are you not being a little premature?" asked an unknown voice archly. "Look to your shoulder. You are bleeding again."

Aejys looked down and saw a red stain spreading across the bandaging. The shoulder throbbed painfully. She pressed her palm hard to the wound, her eyes closed and she fought down a wave of nausea. "You are?"

"Your Red Raven," Hanadi answered. "Hanadi Majios of the Chirakahn Euzadi. Second Lieutenant to the Grand Master. We arrived with Tagalong three days ago."

Aejys started to sink back onto the bed. Instantly Hanadi was there adjusting her pillows so that Aejys could sit supported.

Hanadi stood about five six, which was roughly average height for a non-Sharani woman. Her nose was long, straight and blade thin, her brown skin was a clear creamy matte, her hair, what little showed beneath the blue scarf wrapping her head and throat was heavy, black in shadow and deep auburn in sunlight. The lines of her face were thin, her jaw strong and all assembled into an aristocratic package of proud mien. She appeared to be unarmed, but Aejys knew that for a deception.

"Rest, Lord Mayor," Hanadi said. "We have been hired to protect you and bring your daughter safely here. A strange job for two elite cadres from our guild."

"Set assassins to stop assassins. Lord Mayor?"

Hanadi smiled. "So the nobles and merchants declare you. They wait below to offer allegiance on bended knee. Your seneschal Becca deWythe is hard pressed to keep them out. Your duel with Farendarc has added to your legend."

"I told them no," Aejys said irritably. "You go down and find Thomas Cedarbird and kick his ass out of my building!"

Hanadi lifted an eyebrow. "I do not believe they will listen. But if that is what you wish me to do... I will go kick his ass." Hanadi emphasized the last, running her tongue around the words that conjured interesting images in her literal Euzadi mind.

"No," Aeajys reconsidered, "Get Clemmerick to do it. Get them all out of here! And fetch Becca, I've work to do."

"Those wounds are scarcely a week old—"

"I did not ask your advice."

"Oh, but you did. I am your first lieutenant on this job. It is in the contract."

Aejys gave her a long sidewise glance, taking her measure as she spoke. "Second. Tag's my first. Always."

Hanadi gave her a polite smile that said nothing. "After Tagalong Smith. So be it. She has a high reputation with my people. We tried to recruit her, but she had already given her allegiance to a certain paladin. Yourself, I think."

Aejys eased forward and snagged her pipe and tobacco pouch. She settled back, stuffed the pipe and lit it. Tamlestari had reluctantly removed the strapping the day before. She smoked thoughtfully for a moment. "Well," she said quietly. "Are you going to send for Becca?"

"As you wish, mei ajan." Hanadi gave a small bow, turned, and poked her head out the door. She spoke quickly in a language Aeajys did not know to someone posted there.

"You set guards?"

"Yes, mei ajan. Farendarc was not working alone. My people are taking care of them. No intelligence shall reach Margrenan brye Rowan from them. In fact no one will hear from them again this side of hell."

Aejys stroked her lip with the pipe. "Good. I want to march in a fortnight. Under my own banner. An Ouroboros and three rowan trees. I started it in early summer, hired half the seamers in Vorgensburg to make surcoats and banners, but I never dreamed I would need them so soon. Have Becca hire the other half."

"As you wish."

"And find Tag. I want her sent to Red Beard's to hire kandoyarin. The elite of his elite. They'll ride under my colors. I want none to know where they come from or what they are. Your folks included."

"This makes me your amanuensis, don't you think?"

"You read and write?"

"Three languages. I speak six."

"Then that is what you are, Hanadi. I will give you an expense account. Buy appropriate clothing and whatever you require for this job. You ride?"

"Hmnp! All Euzadi ride. Our children ride before they walk."

A huge form rose from a corner and approached. It brushed up against Hanadi who put an arm around its neck affectionately.

"Shadow Hound," Aejs gasped.

"You have seen them before?" Hanadi asked

"An artist's rendering."

"Well, now you see the real thing. This is Brundarad. We bonded as children. He has been sleeping off his dinner behind your couch."

"What do you feed him?"

"Anything with flesh. He gluttoned on the Gold Ravens' messenger birds when we tore their lair apart."

"I've heard they will eat people."

"Hmnp," Hanadi snorted. "Brundarad has eaten only two that I know of. They attacked me. He ripped their stomachs out," she added with relish, "then tore off their limbs."

Brundarad reared and put his front paws on Aejs' bed. She saw the odd double-handed fore paws: the dog-like primary paw, broad, blunt and strong capable of carrying the creature along swiftly as a horse or leaping deer; the secondary paw, three toed, diverging like a huge thumb, with retractable poison claws.

He put his huge muzzle in her face smelling her breath, then ran his nose over her.

Aejs sat still for his examination, stroking her lower lip with the mouth of the pipe. She sniffed back at him. Brundarad had a warm, pleasant muskiness about him. "I hope I smell as good to you as you do to me," Aejs told him.

"You are a brave one, Aejs' Rowan," Hanadi said. "I admire that. Most people are frightened when he does that."

"Respect is a better gift than fear. Fear is a wasted emotion which achieves nothing."

A slow true smile lifted Hanadi's lips. "The Lionhawk said that to me last solstice."

"Lionhawk? Then she's alive?" Aejs' face registered surprise and hope that one more of the great military leaders had survived the war; someone she could send for to take her part if all else failed.

Hanadi shook her head. "My Lionhawk is not the same as yours. He comes from your people, but he is a man, not a woman. Chimquar is the half-breed son to our High Shaman."

The fresh hope dropped away and Aejs felt suddenly very tired. Her wounds throbbed and hurt. She laid the pipe aside and closed her eyes.

Hanadi touched her lightly on the shoulder.

Aejs opened her eyes and saw the small glass of holadil the Euzadi extended to her. "Half that much," Aejs told her, "I don't want to spend the day sleeping."

Hanadi quirked an eyebrow and inclined her head politely before pouring half of it back into the bottle. "So be it."

Aejs accepted the glass and drank. The pain receded and soon she felt only a little tired. "Go take care of business, Hanadi."

"It would be better that you were not alone."

"You have set guards, no one will bother me."

Hanadi's expression turned doubtful and her eyes strayed to the window.

"No one is coming through that second story window," Aejs said.

"Hmnp," Hanadi snorted. "It has been done."

"Not here, it hasn't. Now go on, I want some time to myself before Becca and Tag get here."

\* \* \* \*

Aejs eased out of bed in the wee hours of the morning while most of the household slept. She pulled on her clothes and boots, working around the strapped down left arm. Tamlestari had restrapped it after seeing the bleeding. Her disheveled black hair, matted from days in bed, framed her haggard, pain-worn face. Her side twinged and hurt with each step and wrong turn. She struggled with the buckle of her sword belt and almost gave up before she succeeded. Aejs limped to her walking staff where it leaned in a corner of the room, then used it to reach the closet where she threw a heavy brown wool cloak around her shoulders. It took two tries to get it

on right.

Aejys opened the door and stepped out. The Assassins' Guild guard came to attention. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"That's my business," Aejys told him, pushing past.

"Wait, I'll get someone to go with you."

"I don't want anyone."

Aejys descended the stairs moving gingerly. The guard followed, then turned aside and pounded on Hanadi's door. "Chieftain! Aejoystry has gone out and refuses to take a guard."

Brundarad opened the door, backing up on his hind legs. Hanadi wrapped a dressing robe around herself and stepped out. She glanced down the hall at Aejys' retreating form. "How like a paladin. Always trying to do it themselves."

"Do you know where she is going?"

Hanadi shook her head. "The tavern master will know. Or Tagalong. Follow our employer discretely. See that no harm comes to her."

Hanadi walked to Tagalong's room and awakened the dwarf. "Where would Aejoystry Rowan go at this hour?"

Tagalong sighed. "The north bluffs. That's where we buried Brendorn."

"Ah. Grief wakes her in the night."

"It's a pattern with her. She's always sorted things out in the wee hours before dawn. Even when we were kids."

"We must get people out to guard her before and behind..." Brundarad grumbled softly at Hanadi's side, pressing against her to gain her attention. "What is that, my friend?"

Brundarad spoke to her in throaty noises, half growling.

"Ahhhhh," Hanadi nodded, responding to Brundarad whom only she could understand because of their bonding, "So be it then. Go, Brundarad, keep her safe."

Brundarad bounded down the stairs and faded into the night shadows.

"She needs no one else," Hanadi told Tagalong.



Tagalong shook her head. "Don't know about that."

"What is going on?" Cassana walked out beside Tamlestari.

"Aejys has taken off. Gone to visit his grave be my guess."

Tamlestari looked alarmed, "Be a miracle, Amita Sana, if she doesn't reopen her wounds or worse."

Cassana Odaren nodded, then ran back into her room. She returned, buckling on her sword, a medicine satchel hanging from her shoulder. "All of you stay here, I'm going after her."

\* \* \* \*

Josh moved back into the shadows near the end of the hall. The moment that Tagalong first arrived with these newcomers out of Creeya he had begun living in his rooms in the Cock and Boar and never again returned to his boltholes. They gave him the shivers, these paladins of Hadjys the nethergod. They did not call themselves paladins, but that was what they were. The holy avengers of the Dark Judge who cleansed the souls of those who harmed the innocent and helpless through harsh punishment in his nine hells. They had odd auras and shadows. Gray. And that should have been the end of it, but for a fluttering flicker of golden among the gray.

Abelard. Abelard. Abelard.

A scream crept up the back of Josh's throat and hovered at the back, coiling like a snake, pressing upward against the base of his mouth, struggling to escape. He fled into his room, crawled under the blankets, and lay there for several heartbeats. Then his hand stole out to the nightstand and he opened the lower door, taking out his bottle. He sat up and took a series of long pulls before returning the bottle. Josh did not need to hide his bottles any longer, but old habits and fears were hard to break. He constantly felt as if someone would arrive to steal the bottle away at any minute, although it had not happened in nearly five years. His body eased with the liquor, but now his mind danced with images and visions and he could see hordes of sa'necari feeding in arcane rites or simply draining their victims like vampires. Josh stifled another scream and huddled down into the blankets further, praying for sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Aejys' black hair hung loose and disheveled about her face and down her back as she rode slowly up the steep rocky path to the bluffs. She leaned her staff against her right knee with one end in the lance cup, her right hand gripping it. She did not need the reins to guide the wynderjyn: her knees and her voice did that. Despite Gwyndar's best efforts he sometimes jostled her and she winced with a sharp intake of breath. The moist air smelled of brine, sweet pine and pungent cedar. Birds sang to the morning trilling and warbling. Dawn stained the sky with pinks and pale

orange. A small headstone stood in a clearing dominated by tremendous cedars. Aejs' throat tightened as she paused before it. Gwyndar knelt. She slid out of the saddle, moving gingerly in an effort to minimize the pain in her side and shoulder with limited success. She ignored all but the worst of it. The former Aroanan paladin, leaning heavily on her staff, lowered herself to the earth beside Brendorn's grave. Aejs crossed her legs. She pressed her forehead against the staff, feeling the tightness in her throat, the heaviness in her chest and stomach like a gathering of rocks.

"I sent his soul to hell, Brendorn," Aejs spoke softly, each word catching in her throat. "I have made a mess of every thing I set hand to since Bucharsa..." She heaved a great sigh. "Well, maybe not everything. I have been good to Vorgensburg... I wanted to share it with you and Ladonys."

She stroked her fingers through the earth covering him, creating little mounds, then smoothing it flat again. "I wish Ladonys had come instead of you... She could have held her own with him, I think." Aejs drew a long shuddering breath, her eyes clenching shut. She could feel the grief rising up like a cresting wave. Aejs tried to close it back, to control it lest it overwhelm her.

"I'm going after Laeoli and Ladonys. Nothing, not even the Hellgod himself, will stop me from bringing them out, I swear it!"

Aejs laid her forehead against the headstone, "Oh, god! Why didn't I bring you with me? Why was I such a fool?" The sobs forced their way out, at first dry and rasping, then hard and wrenching. Finally the tears came and she wept freely, alternating between her lament for Brendorn and cursing herself for not bringing her family with her.

Gwyndar whinnied and Aejs looked up. Cassana sat upon Ajandar six yards off.

"I thought I would find you here," Cassana's soft voice interrupted Aejs' weeping. She dismounted, joining Aejs at his graveside.

"Why couldn't he have waited?"

Cassana slipped a strong arm around Aejs. "He had not meant to take on Farendarc alone. It just happened."

Aejs pressed the palms of her hands into her eyes. "What are you saying?"

"Brendorn promised Tag he would run away, not fight Farendarc. Tagalong felt certain we would see him first, or some other member of your household. Even the scullery boy, Zacham, knew to watch for Farendarc. We never dreamed it would be Brendorn, minding his own business, who would come on him first. Everything went wrong from the start. Clemmerick was off on an errand; Tag was sleeping late having searched for Red Ravens till the wee hours. Tamlestari and I were watching the

gates. None of us knew he was already in the city. I realize now that we should have considered the possibility," Cassana sighed. "It happened very fast, Aejys. Grymlyken and his cohorts were out of the tavern as soon as we heard the cries ... but Brendorn was mortally wounded before anyone could get there to help him. He was prepared to die, but he was not planning on it."

"I keep thinking if I had just..."

"No!" Cassana interrupted her, "There is nothing you could have done, except maybe die with him. You, I and Tag together. We could have taken him. But no other combination would have worked. Aejys, had that wound been just a little more to the right, we would have been avenging you, not wrapping your wounds. It is luck or god's will that preserved you. Not your skill. That crowd at the dueling grounds would have torn Farendarc apart if you had died there and I don't mean just the members of your household."

"I miss Brendorn," Aejys said softly.

"I miss him too. He was my friend."

"There's a drawer in my desk ... it's full of letters I wrote to him and Ladonys and never sent. So long as he was alive, I could plan and dream about how it would be when I brought them all out. For years I kept reaching for them in the night. I got past it. Then I have one god-blessed night with him ... and I'm feeling for him in my sleep. When I don't find him I come fully awake and remember he's gone. And I cannot find him anymore ... ever again. Even when I bring Ladonys out, there will still be an empty place in a bed that held three."

"That is how I felt after losing Colin. It was years before I stopped expecting to turn a corner and find him standing there. Don't be afraid of the grieving."

"I didn't grieve for my friends... I missed them, but I didn't grieve as others did. I couldn't afford to stop and feel ... not and stay one jump ahead of the Waejontori."

"At least you came out of the war with your family intact. Very few did. I lost both my ma'arams and two of my older sisters as well as Colin."

"That does not make it any easier."

"I know it doesn't."

"God damn it all!" Aejys began striking the headstone with her fist until she bloodied the knuckles and Cassana stopped her, caught her hand.

The younger woman pulled a scarf from her pocket and wrapped Aejys' hand. "When I met Colin I was very young, very inexperienced. I hadn't taken so much as a shield mate yet. I had never been beyond the borders of my own land before. Ours

was an intense love, physically, emotionally, spiritually. We had three years, running, hiding and fighting alongside Kalestari Desharen. And then he was dead. At least you still have Ladonys. You had triaded before you lost him."

"Oh, god. What will I tell Ladonys..."

Cassana gripped Aeijys' arm, "You will find the words, I am sure of it. The war was nearly over when you left Shaurone. But it would only have differed in degree. Do you really believe that it would have been better to have put Brendorn and Laeoli through that?"

"Ladonys, Tag and I – we could have protected them."

"Are you certain of that?"

Aeijys' eyes met Cassana's and held them for a long moment, and then the soldier dropped her gaze with a sigh. "No, I'm not certain." Aeijys' hand went to her upper chest, applying pressure to the wound that was beginning to hurt.

Cassana opened Aeijys' shirt. A small staining appeared on the bandage. "Let's get you home." Cassana's whistle brought Ajandar and Gwyndar to them.

Aeijys shook her head. "Why couldn't Ladonys have come instead?"

"Ladonys sent him to me, she felt his woodcraft was a greater advantage in reaching me and then you than her warcraft would have been. Aeijys," Cassana leaned close and slipped a comforting arm around the former paladin, "she was right. Ladonys would never have made it as far as we did. Even with all of Brendorn's skills leading us, the three myn-at-arms I brought with us were slain before we got as far as Beltria. The undead are stalking the marches again."

Aeijys pressed her hand to the wound again, bending forward as she worked to focus past the pain. "Hell shitting damnation! What are you saying?" Even as she said it, she remembered Aroana's admonition that the war was not over, merely gone a different and more insidious direction.

"I did not want to show you this until you were stronger." Cassana extended the letter from Margren to Farendarc. "I didn't want you racing off half-healed, but you seem determined to do that anyway."

Aeijys read and her face grew grave. "I must get Laeoli out."

"I thought you'd probably want to kill Margren."

"I do, but I cannot. I guess it's time I made this known. The year Kalestari died. When the levies were gathering at Castle Rowan to carry the war to Waejontor. I promised my ma'aram that I would never, in any way, harm Margren. My life be

forfeit to God."

Cassana looked deeply shaken. "She condemned you with a promise."

Aejys nodded. "Deep inside myself I keep thinking that going back will lead to breaking that vow in some way – some little way. And my life be forfeit–"

"Then we've called you back to die."

"You had no choice. I'm the only one who can make Kaethreyn let go of Laeoli without starting a war." Aejys pressed harder on the wound, bending more. "Better to die with honor, than to live without it." But if all I do is get my daughter out, if I abandon Shaurone to its enemies, what honor will I have left?

Cassana fetched a satchel from Ajandar. She opened a small flask and raised it to Aejys' mouth. "Just a small swallow. I don't want you fainting in the saddle."

Aejys nodded and took a little. As Cassana helped her mount Aejys spoke out of the depths of her pain and exhaustion and grief, "Maybe I should just kill Margren and then myself. Put an end to all this shit."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Cassana said sharply. "I am placing my life between you and your sister from this moment forward."

## CHAPTER FIVE. OF MAGES AND MERCENARIES

Clemmerick looked up from a pile of papers spread out next to a large ledger book as Zacham showed the pilgrim into the office. Several bundles of the notched tithing sticks Becca used to keep track of stores and purchases lay at his left hand in two stacks. He laid aside his quill, turning in his enormous chair to see the mon. He gave Becca, sitting beside him in a loose-sleeved red shirt laced at the neck and wrists under a black suede jerkin and her pants, a nod and she turned also. The end of her sling poked out of the corner of the long waist pouch. It did not seem as comfortable there as it had in her apron or pockets.

Becca rose from her seat, stepping away from the table. The pilgrim was lean with a scrawny wheaten wisp of a beard and spiky silver-blond eyebrows on a rounded, deceptively immature face. After taking in his unimpressive appearance, the ogre went back to his work.

"What can I help you with, sir pilgrim?" Becca asked in a direct, stare down fashion.

"I wish to see Aejys Rowan," he said politely. "You are her seneschal?"

"Lot of people want to see Aejys Rowan," Becca said, guardedly, her hands settling

on her hips, fingertips hooking and twining the edge of her sling. It occurred to her that she really ought to learn to use a blade. "Why should she see you?"

"Because I have found something she wants and am returning it to her," Eliahu extended the black armband and the lock of auburn hair.

"You found it!" Becca's eyes brightened, her expression softening. "I looked all over..."

"I lingered at the Dueling Grounds and found it," Eliahu's voice was high and almost sweet. "I did not want to risk it falling into any hands but hers so I picked it up." He extended the band and hair to her.

Becca nodded, taking it from his hands. "She'll want to thank you for it. Wait here."

\* \* \* \*

Aejys sat at her desk in a pillow stuffed chair with her feet propped up in an adjacent chair, smoking her pipe thoughtfully. "What is it, Becca?" she asked when the tavern master entered.

Becca extended the black armband and the lock of hair.

Aejys' lips curved into a grateful, yet sad, smile and her eyes misted just a little at the edges. Since his death, Aejys Rowan wore her feelings for Brendorn on her sleeve where everything seemed to brush against it. "You found it," she said, taking it from the tavern master's hand.

"No," Becca said, "A pilgrim named Eli Jonasson found it. He wants to meet you."

Aejys kissed the lock of hair. "Send him in."

"Do you think it wise to see a stranger?" Hanadi's measured voice broke in on their awareness, startling Becca who had not been aware of the assassin curled up silently on the couch near the window.

Becca's expression dissolved into schooled neutrality she reserved for distasteful customers of high rank whom she could not afford to smack. Twice in the last year she had smacked them anyway, she reminded herself, and only Aejys' intervention had kept her out of the stocks or worse. Aejys was far more tolerant of Becca's infrequent lapses than any employer before her: Becca repaid this tolerance with a loyalty as ferocious as Tagalong's. "He's a harmless little mon. Clemmerick checked him out."

"My most dangerous agents are harmless looking little myn."

Becca's lips thinned in the tiniest possible sign of irritation. The tavern master knew

Hanadi's profession and could not be certain whether it was that or the mon herself that rubbed her the wrong way; just being around Hanadi put Becca on her guard and on edge. "I am a very good judge of character."

Hanadi shrugged. "Hmph! Everyone is until they are not."

"He found this, I will see him," Aejs told her.

"So be it." Hanadi moved into the shadows by the door where she could not be seen as he entered.

Becca returned shortly and escorted Eliahu to Aejs' sitting room where he stood hesitantly in the doorway. She took him by the arm, propelling him firmly, but gently by the elbow to within a few feet of her desk. Becca fought down a wave of irritation at his meekness, reminding herself that pilgrims, of which she knew only from gossip, were supposed to be meek and hesitant.

Aejs' eyes grew misty as she held the lock of hair, raised it to her face; the hair still smelled of him. She sucked back a sigh, dismissing Becca with a wave and turning to Eliahu, "What can I do for you?"

Eliahu met her measuring gaze with more confidence than he had shown Becca. "I wish to join your company."

Aejs looked his slender, almost fragile form over again: he did not look like much of a fighter, but she asked anyway. "Can you fight? This is no quest for the faint-hearted. Those who cannot fend for themselves in a battle cannot go."

"Then let me demonstrate," he said, a long amused smile completely transforming his face from meek to supremely confident. He whipped out three daggers concealed in his robes. They thunked into the table exactly one inch from Aejs' right hand.

Instantly Hanadi had her arm around his throat, jerking him off balance, her dagger pricking his side level with his kidneys. A single move and she would kill him; he could tell that Hanadi was an expert by the way she held him, yet the smile never left his face. He had other cards to play but wished to withhold them for the present.

"Release him, Hanadi." Aejs lifted a questioning brow, regarding him with interest. "If he had meant to kill me, I'd be dead," she said evenly. "What kind of position are you looking for?"

"I'm a cook."

Aejs thought about that one in surprise, then nodded. "A good one, I hope. Where are you from and who are you?"

"My name is Eli Jonasson, my father is armsmaster to the Lord of the Iron Glacier,"

he pulled a sheaf of papers from a pocket in his robes. "My lord gave me these as letters of introduction should it be required."

Aejys read them.

TO ANY IT MAY CONCERN,

Eli Jonasson, youngest son of Jonas Gunderson, my arms master, has served me faithfully for ten years and should he require aid or employment during his wanderyears, I attest to his good nature, dependability, and loyalty to both persons and causes noble.

On this the tenth day of the sixth moon of the year 1055.

Eliahu Solistis

Lord of the Iron Glacier.

It was affixed with a seal Aejys had never seen before, a staff radiating thunderbolts. She decided to have Hanadi or Cassana investigate its origins just to be cautious.

"I assume this means you can use other weapons as well?" she asked.

Eliahu nodded, "Sword, lance and halberd."

Aejys gave his slender form another doubtful look. "You're hired. We have three cook's helpers, but until now no cook. Write him a note, Hanadi, and send him along to Tag."

\* \* \* \*

Cassana brought the lunch tray up herself. Aejys sat in a soft chair with pillows to her healing side. Nine days had passed since the duel. The stubborn strength of the lapsed paladin surpassed all but a very few she had known during the war. Theirs was a resilient, hardy race capable of tremendous toughness when circumstances demanded. They had become recognized as the bulwark of the West when the banewitches swept out of Waejontor; and those races who had forgotten during the five hundred years respite remembered that only the vigilance of Shaurone had given them those years of freedom from the shadows that broke upon them when the Great War came. Where they had been held in suspicion by their western neighbors before the war, after it they were held in awe and respect.

"How is it going?" Aejys greeted her, lifting her hand from the pages of the book on her lap to reach for her pipe. The healing arm twinged as she slipped it out of the sling and brought the pipe to her lips.

Cassana settled the tray on the table beside her chair. "Tagalong has tents set up on



the green outside Vorgensburg. Your drivers are unhappy about you taking the wagons and not them. Two of them tried to demonstrate their martial skills in the taproom to impress me. Becca vanquished them with a broom."

Aejys laid aside her pipe. She spread a blended nutbutter on the crisp hot acorn bread, speared a steamed clam, wrapping it in the buttery folds. "Becca's quite feisty for an outlands woman. That's one of the reasons I put her in charge of the Cock and Boar."

"I think you should officially make her your seneschal, Aejys. She's doing the job already."

"Tag said something like that just before you got here."

"In that case you're out voted," Cassana grinned.

"Yes, I guess I am. When lunch is finished have Becca sent up and I'll promote her."

"And a bonus. The seneschal of a Sharani ha'taren," she used the Sharani word for the paladins of Aroana, "should never be going around in skirts."

Aejys nodded. "Done," she said: Then her expression turned sober, "Cassana, what I said a few nights ago ... about killing Margren..." she said, leaving out the part regarding herself, "I didn't mean it. I was just tired."

"I know."

Aejys clasped Cassana's hands. "I have missed my friends, Sana. You sift what I say like a miller discarding the chaff and keeping the wheat. Now what is this about my drivers?"

"They do not wish to be left behind."

Aejys took a sip of plum cordial, nodding. "I'm taking just six wagons. I have thirteen drivers. In case you haven't noticed, Cassana, I have no white feathers among my retainers." Aejys speared another clam, "If Becca bested them, it's to her strength."

"Is that enough to convince folks it's a trading expedition?"

"Should be. Before the War of the Three Queens, there was a trade road running across the top, from the Kwaklahmyn villages through Cherdon'datar and Vallimrah then straight on to Shaurone."

"Five hundred years ago," Cassana said, with an emphatic tap. "Things change."

"Yes, but it was legended to be a very rich route. That's a legitimate reason to try it as well as to bring only so much stuff in case it isn't there. And it's off the well worn ways, that should make it harder for Margren to keep track of us." Aeijys speared another clam and chewed for a moment. "Tell Tag to keep an eye out for spies, but don't hurt them, just keep their noses clean."

"Spies?"

"Cedarbird wanted a piece of the pie, but I turned him down."

\* \* \* \*

The kandoyarin captain Johannes Redbeard stood in the doorway of Aeijys Rowan's office, he wore soft riding leathers and a long sleeved shirt, a parting in the neck lacing showed the gleam of well-kept chain mail. His close-cropped straw-colored hair contrasted sharply with a red beard just a shade more orange than Tagalong's crimson mane. He was a burly man, huge torso, and short legs, built for power, but he had speed enough and cunning with the longsword he carried. At least that was what Aeijys had heard and her sources were not given to exaggeration. The mercenaries out of Ocealay, kandoyarin, were bonded by the Five Captains who ruled the city-state. However, they were also reputed to occasionally display a certain capriciousness in their own realm, which made Aeijys cautious. She had not dealt with the grey badgers before, as they were euphemistically referred to in some quarters, so she intended to keep a tight rein on them.

Aeijys moved her legs from the table to the seat of the chair next to her. She wore brown leggings, comfortably well-worn boots, and a tunic of deep green. The left arm in its sling rested on the table. She pulled her pipe from between her teeth long enough to say, "Come in and sit down."

Red Beard took a seat across from her, leaning forward a little on his elbows. "What will we be fighting on this expedition of yours?"

Aeijys met his eyes steadily. "I cannot be certain, that's why I need more arms than I can field just now. We're going to Shaurone to pick up what I'm owed from my estates there and then on to Iradrim. Good dwarf and Sharani steel should bring a fine price on the coast." As she spoke she rolled a small round object back and forth with her left hand.

"If you expect trouble, you'd need more units than you're hiring." Johannes' eyes kept being drawn to the bright object in her hand.

"No," Aeijys corrected him. "I have it on good authority that what I have will be enough."

"And how do you get us over the Sharani border? Shaurone's still not wild about armed men."

"Times change. My livery will get you in. You wear my colors and no one will question you. I've hired all the tailors and seamers in Vorgensburg, there will be more than enough tabards for all."

"Then you are who they say," he said pointedly. "The Lion of Rowanslea."

Aejys seized his eyes with hers, studying him, challenging him. "Does that bother you?"

Johannes looked uncomfortable for a moment, letting his eyes drift again to her bauble. "I know what the Lion of Rowanslea can do. What you did during the war."

"Then we have a deal?"

"It's been seven years or more since you last commanded troops..." He met her eyes again, pushing, "You should let me take charge."

Aejys burst out laughing and slapped the table. Johannes frowned, clearly confused: was she insulting him? She sobered as suddenly as she had laughed. "No. We are going where you have never been. But I have."

"And this livery thing... We've always worn our own colors..."

"When we reach Shaurone, those colors of yours will make your people bait to every sword in the realm. You cannot cross the border in them. Further more, from the outset I want to create an impression that I already have my own force of arms, under my own banner. You may not realize, but I have been quietly hiring and training for months now."

"Yah, I've heard. Your household turned those pirates."

Aejys smiled thinly. "If I wanted to take a month or more I could raise the rest that I need and train it myself. But that would put us arriving in winter. I want to get there ahead of the snows." Suddenly the distance, which had previously meant a measure of safety from Margren, had become a danger to those Aejys loved.

"And what kind of chain of command are you figuring on?"

"You would take your orders from me, Tag and my amanuensis, Hanadi."

"That's a lot of leaders ... could cause confusion..."

Aejys allowed a small smile at the way he maneuvered for more authority. "Not at all. Tag and Hanadi speak for me. But you will be part of my inner council on this expedition along with Tag, Hanadi, Tamlestari and the Ajan Odaren." Aejys slid the ball she had been playing with over to Red Beard. He took the smooth round globe

in his hands and gasped. It was a huge polished but as yet uncut ruby.

"That's your personal advance above and beyond what I pay for your myn," Aejys told him. "You will find me a generous employer. You and your men have never ventured into the lands we will be passing through. I have. We will not be following the trade routes. I am going across the top and east into the Yarrendar Mar'ajante. We are going in through Shaurone's 'postern gate' so to speak. You will give me strict obedience. You will not question my orders at any point. Understood? I do not want drawn sword quarrels when diplomacy will suffice. I will deal severely with anyone who disobeys my orders."

"That is understood," he said, rolling the ruby around in his hand greedily. "You have yourself an army." He extended his hand and clasped Aejys' hand. She matched his grip and her strength lived up to her legend as it had come out of the war.

Aejys gave him a crooked smile and refilled her pipe. "Go on down to the common room, my seneschal will see to your needs. Today everything is on the house." Aejys lit her pipe as she watched him leave, saying softly under her breath. "You old wolf, I'll be keeping close eyes on you."

\* \* \* \*

Tamlestari walked through the market square, going from booth to booth and from shop to shop. Already the pale cream color was beginning to show at the roots of her hair. She had considered touching it up, even gotten her dye out, but Aejys' words of that first meeting hung in her thoughts and she put the stoppered bottle in her pocket instead, feeling a strong wave of defiance. Besides, she was in a strange land where no one knew her, where no one could say whether she was or was not the wrong color. What was the wrong color anyway? Had it really been expected of her? Or had she merely given expression to those deeply buried self-doubts that sometimes rose so ferociously in her heart.

A small gang of street children rushed past her, chasing a ball. Tamlestari stepped from their path only to collide with another child she had not seen. She stared down into a dirt-smeared face, noticing the child's skin was light beneath the brown caking and his hair a sun-bleached blond.

He gave her a quick pardon-me dip of his shoulders before running on to overtake his companions. She stared after him, likening his dirt to the dye on her skin, feeling an odd dip in her stomach. She shook herself and walked on.

She tried the smoked salmon and dipped raw clams in a fiery sauce at a small eatery, sitting at one of the little tables under a woven cedar awning. She bought two small blackberry cakes, put one in her pocket, and nibbled the other as she walked. She kept thinking about Aejys Rowan. The older woman stirred a longing in her heart and body that went beyond anything she had experienced. She had had only a few lovers over the years, brief, intense liaisons that faded quickly to comfortable

friendship. Like many races and creatures hard pressed by violent forces, the Sharani came to sexual maturity very young. That and a long, disease resistant life span had allowed the Sharani to out breed their losses in the constant skirmishing with the Waejontori and other monstrous creatures. It was not unusual for a Sharani woman to start a new family at seventy. Tamlestari had taken her first lover at eleven. But none of those she had lain with over the years had ever affected her this intensely before. She wanted Aeijys Rowan and did not quite know how to approach her: she had never been drawn to an older woman before. Even if she could figure it out, she could not allow herself to take advantage of Aeijys' grief by trying to climb into Brendorn's place in the lapsed paladin's bed.

She angled back through town to the waterfront and stood for a time staring out across the water. It went out across the horizon forever, stretching with apparent infiniteness before her. She felt diminished by the size of it, melancholy aching through her mind and body. Its vastness redefined her image of reality, which had always been bounded by mountains, trees, and walls and shrank her world almost into meaninglessness. The sea frightened and attracted her at the same time; drawing her the way a flame draws a moth knowing it will get burned. So she looked for a way to get closer to it.

Gradually the docks and quays gave way to sandy beach. The Sharani watched a small crowd of children run bare foot along the edge of the water, the tide rippling up across their feet, and then retreating to come again. They carried buckets and small shovels, stopping now and again to dig at the sand with their toes as if hunting something.

Tamlestari sat down on a rocky outcropping and pulled off her boots. She tucked them under her arm and walked down to the water. As it eddied toward her, her stomach felt ready to drop out of her body and she retreated. She was just being silly and foolish, she told herself, but she had never encountered such a vast amount of water before or had it chase her up the shore. Tamlestari approached the retreating water again, determined to see what it felt like only to move once more just out of its reach.

Laughter erupted behind her and Tamlestari turned, blushing furiously.

"Hey, landsmon! Water doesn't bite you know!" A boy of sixteen laughed. Five or six smaller ones, boys and girls, crowded around him, woven baskets and small wooden spades in hand. They giggled. They were more brown than bronze, their hair a shiny blue-black worn in two braids.

"I have never seen the sea before," Tamlestari said.

The tall youth took her measure, catching the glint of chain mail at the edge of her shirt and the sword at her side. Then black eyes met the slanted green ones and he gasped. "I've never seen your kind before!"

"Nor I yours," Tamlestari answered, facing him down squarely, left hand on her hip and her right thumbing the pommel of her sword.

"You should not mess with what you don't know, Birch," said a rough-edged voice.

All eyes turned to Josh. The sot had been lying beneath the shadow of a small rocky outcropping, listening to the sea when Tamlestari's voice attracted his attention. He sat up, his clothes coated in sand, stained from last night's binge and wet from chasing waves; sand drying into a crust in his beard and hair. He looked more like some strange sea-born creature than a mon just then.

The Kwaklahmyn youth shrugged. "We were not bothering her. We are digging clams. Come along, landsmon, tell us news of the world and we'll help you get your feet wet. That was what you were trying to do, wasn't it?"

One of the girls tugged at Tamlestari's boots. "Put them over there."

Josh crossed the strand to take the boots himself. "Off with you! I'll be talking to Branch about your mistreating strangers!"

The younger children snapped into silence, staring at their feet and then fleeing down the beach.

Birch stood his ground, glaring. "I did not intend any harm. You have no reason to complain to my grandfather."

"Maybe," Josh said, his words soft with an odd indecipherable twist. "But I've watched you dunk foreigners before."

The edge of Birch's mouth twitched. "No harm to them."

"There's no harm in you, Birch," Josh said, pulling a silver gilt flask from his pocket, "just mischief. This one's my friend." He took a swig and offered it to Tamlestari who shook her head.

Birch stalked off.

"You are my friend, aren't you?" Josh looked deeply into Tamlestari's eyes, searching for something.

Tamlestari wondered what that was. She read in Josh's eyes a kindness and compassion so intense that she thought it must tear his heart and soul to feel it. "Yes." She took his hand, her shields snapping into place so she would not accidentally start reading his body chemistry.

They walked to a cluster of large rocks. There they sat, Josh cross-legged and Tamlestari with her feet hanging down for the water to eddy across them.

"Warm wet sand feels good squishing between your toes," Josh told her, taking another swig.

"Do you always drink so much?"

Josh shrugged. "Sometimes."

"Do you ever try not to?"

"Sometimes."

"Tagalong told me that strange things happen when you drink."

Josh picked up a bit of shell, examining it carefully, and then scrapping at the rock with it. "That's why I try to stop. But I can't." He picked up a tiny sliver of driftwood, digging the sand from the shell, refusing to meet her eyes.

"Maybe I can help," Tamlestari retrieved his hand, gently pulling the shell from his grip. "You know what I am?"

Josh nodded. "Reader."

"May I?"

Josh, looking uneasy, retrieved his shell and began scraping it against the rock again in a nervous motion. "Guess so. Just don't tell me anything about me."

Tamlestari opened her awareness. She felt the texture of his skin, the rough weather-reddened hands ridged with broad veins and tendon. They were honest hands that had worked hard; that begged drinks but never stole to buy them. She sensed the wasted pattern of his muscles that had once been strong, that could still be again; and she found the damaged liver and other ailing organs: He had taken to drink and the drink had eaten him alive. She guessed the sot had five years maybe a little more left of life if he kept drinking. That saddened her because he was a kind mon. So she turned her attention away and saw the cells of his body as a golden grid work with a pattern of glistening silver-white light rippling through them, which she had never seen before. She found the holadil lodged within them. The silver-white light became brighter and brighter. There would be no way to get it out of his system. A sharp tingling grew in back of Tamlestari's throat and crawled up the base of her neck, spreading through her head. It was the taste of power and it felt as though it were reaching out for her. Tamlestari released Josh with a yelp, "Mage!"

Josh blanched, shaking his head like a dog that had bitten down on its own tongue. He snatched Tamlestari's boots and fled with them down the strand.

"Josh! Come back! My boots!" She scrambled after him, but the sharp rocks hurt

her feet and she thought she would never get back onto the soft sand. By that time Josh, moving at a pace that astonished her, was halfway to a low pole fence surrounding a dozen plank houses. Once on the sand, the sylvan fleetness she inherited from her ma'aram showed and she gained on the sot. She ran so lightly that her flying feet left no mark. Josh opened the gate and fled inside. Tamlestari halted and stared through.

A tall pole wrought in strange animal shapes and faces stood before the largest house. The carved beak of a huge bird, the eyes and features depicted in heavy lines of black, filled in with white and a rusty red, thrust out over the door. A mon, his skin a shade more brown and less bronze than the Sharani, sat upon a tree round. He wore soft, deerskin breeches, a loose sleeved black shirt and soft boots. He held a small piece of wood in his hand, working its surface slowly with a small knife.

"What is that?" Tamlestari asked, nodding at the pole as she opened the gate and stepped inside.

The man looked up. His lower lip hung away from his teeth, weighted down by a heavy labret. He had broad, high cheekbones, a strong cleft chin, full lips and large, black, long-lashed eyes. "That is the totem of my clan. You read it from the bottom up."

"Totem?"

The man nodded, pointing to the lowest figure on the totem, a bird with a tremendous beak. "That is Raven. He found our people in a clam shell."

"A clam shell?" Tamlestari thought for a moment of how small the clams she had eaten were. "Clams are so small..."

The Kwaklahmyn shaman smiled. "Yes. And when the old world grew bleak for my people Raven opened a gate and brought us here. He gave us seeds to plant and fed us so that we would not eat them. All that grows on the northwest coast grew from the seeds of Raven."

"Thank you," Tamlestari said politely. "I am looking for a mon who stole my boots, Josh."

He stood, laying aside his work, and touched her hair much as Aeijys had done. "You are sylvan?"

"Part," Tamlestari nodded, wondering where this was going; yet feeling neither threat nor intrusion in his words and touch.

"You should not stain the lovely gold the gods have given you."

"I am looking for Josh," Tamlestari repeated.



Before she could react the man had seized her hair with a twist and slashed away the black from the base of her neck down. She sprang back, alarmed, her sword clearing its sheath and then returning: He could have cut her throat as easily as he did her hair.

He sheathed the little blade. "Give this to the Gods of the Waves," he placed her shorn hair in her hands, "and they will give you your hearts desire."

Tamlestari dropped cross-legged on the sand, feeling stunned and confused, staring at her locks. The ha'taren only cut their hair as a sign of sorrow or an offering to their god in time of desperate need. What would she tell the others? That a crazy old mon cut her hair off? "What I want," she said slowly, "is my boots."

"I have them," the mon said, bringing them from behind his tree round. "You frightened Josh. He is hiding in the smoke house."

"I don't understand ... any of this."

He nodded solicitously. "Most do not. I am Branch, shaman and leader to my people here. They call me that because I sought for god in the top of a sacred tree. The old shaman caught me. I was so frightened by his wrath I fell out. I broke nearly every branch I grabbed at. But when I hit the ground there was not a scratch or bruise upon me.

"Put your boots on. Let me tell you about Josh. I have known him since he was as small as my grandchildren. He was found as a small child by a sailor on a nearby island. There are hundreds of islands along the northwest coast. The sailor's ship put in for water and supplies, only to find the village destroyed. Josh lived only because his dying mother covered him with her own body. The sailor took him in and raised him with his own son like they were brothers. But when Josh was six he started showing signs of having the magic. Well, the sailor was frightened of magic, so he found a back alley mage to burn the magic out of Josh."

"No," Tamlestari hissed in utter horror. "A child's soul and body should never be damaged that way."

"As a Reader ... I know what you are ... you understand that, but Josh's foster-father did not know or he simply did not care. That's not important. Add in to that, Josh's foster-father and brother were killed when an archenwurm destroyed their ship just off the blowholes – same one Aejs killed – and almost got Josh also. He saw them eaten alive and he's been drunk ever since. Aejs complicated things with the holadil, giving him the magic back sideways."

"He must stop drinking. It's not a good thing."

"Don't make judgments," the shaman said sharply. "Aejs doesn't. I don't. Josh

hurts no one but himself. He's helped quite a few."

"But it's killing him," she protested.

"It's his life. Now come on and we will try to coax him out."

\* \* \* \*

Tamlestari slipped out of the Cock and Boar by way of the back stairs into the courtyard. The night was still and very quiet. Mist had rolled in off the sea and the night was clothed in deep white. The street lamps at the corners shone like bright will'o'wisps where all else lay in shadows. She walked toward the beach, knowing the paths from her previous days of wandering the city. The tall houses, sharing walls in narrow huddles along the silent lanes cast empty eyes at the young paladin as she walked. Nothing seemed familiar, as if the life that had been there by daylight had died in the witching hours before the dawn.

Branch's words concerning the significance of her midnight offering hovered in her thoughts. Never before had she wanted anyone as intensely as she did Aejs Rowan. She imagined the touch of Aejs' lips upon her own with profound longing, dreaming of her hands upon her young breasts. She had no right to ask it, for she knew well the grief that Aejs felt concerning Brendorn. Tamlestari could not dream of replacing Brendorn in the lapsed paladin's heart – and yet she dreamed and in her dreams she longed for that touch and the quickening of its expression. She knew nothing of the totems of which Branch spoke on those past days, and yet she could only pray that it might be. Guilt and desire warred within her and, at times, she faltered in her steps, but continued on. Could love, as deeply as she felt it, be wrong? Her mind winced away from it, falling slave to her emotions – and love enslaved her to its needs. The young paladin could only say, to herself, that she would surely die without the love of Aejs Rowan.

Tamlestari found her way to the small promontory where she had sat with Josh. The tide was up and the spray misted about her as she settled cross-legged upon it. The tide had risen so deeply that where she had earlier sat, her ankles wet by the tide, she could now have felt it to her knees. She gazed first at the full moon and then the waters, trying to visualize the sea-wolf and Raven as the shaman had bid her. She took the hair, which Branch had severed from her head, and watched the tide change as she sat above it. She cast her hair upon the retreating waters and said "Aejs Rowan."

The water lifted the hair and carried it away to places unimaginable to Tamlestari.

\* \* \* \*

Cassana sat at a small rectangular table in the parlor of the room she shared with Tamlestari. Three well-cushioned chairs flanked the table. Thick rugs covered the hardwood floor. A soft couch pressed the west wall; multi-colored pillows lay in the

corners. The wind blew strongly outside, heralding an early autumn while it rattled the trees. The little pile of ten rings; two set with stones, one a ruby, the other a bit of onyx; four simple bands of gold, one of them must have belonged to a child for it was very small; and four wide silver bands covered in intricate sylvan runes.

The early morning sun thrust glowing lances of gold across the table. Where it touched her hands the scars stood out in sharp relief; pink-white ridges against her dark skin.

Fourteen years today...

Cassana separated the rings into three clusters. Her right hand ached sharply from the early chill and she rubbed it absently; remembering with an equal, but non-physical ache: They drove knives through my hands.

She turned the ruby in her hands and found a tiny catch. Her pulse quickened with the memories. The catch opened. Behind it was a signet. A dove gripping a thorn. It belonged to one of the lesser Sharani barons, something a younger daughter might have. She would need to find out if any were missing. This is, if memory serves, a vassal of Rowanslea.

They stank of sweat and booze and urine. Two had hold of Colin, pinning him down with a knee in the small of his back and knife to his throat. A wave of helpless swept her as she saw victory snatched from her grasp. She knelt and laid her sword on the ground.

Cassana closed her eyes for a moment trying to relax, to get her focus back, to slow her breathing. She re-opened her eyes. The onyx ring had nothing on it to give her any clue as to its origins.

Why now? I have not remembered all of this in years... I thought I was past this...

She picked up one of the golden bands. Cassana found nothing unusual about it at first glance. Just a very plain golden band, heavy in her hand.

The weight of the myn, pressing down on her, pulling her legs apart, forcing them apart. The searing pain of the knives going through her hands. The pressure of their bodies on hers, their rancid odors. Pressure. Tearing at her inside and outside. The stickiness, smelliness of their seed oozing from her.

Revulsion rose up in Cassana's stomach. She left the ring on the table, rose and went stiffly to the window, controlling an urge to vomit. Her whole body heaved and shuddered, but nothing came out. She gulped in the fresh outside air. Slowly the sensations subsided. "We all have our scars, Aejys," she muttered to herself, "our griefs. It's what we do with them that matters."

She returned to the table, this time sitting on the opposite side. From that angle the

sunlight glanced along the inside of the nearest band. The touch of the morning light brought forth a rune and a name. Marveling, Cassana picked it up and held it to catch even more light.

Colin lay in a corner bound and forgotten. All the myn were so eager to have their turn shoving inside her that they had left no one to threaten him. Cassana jerked her hands from the ground, bringing the knives with her. She twisted and kicked free of the myn, while pulling the first blade from her hand with her mouth. She ignored the pain, gripping the knives that had held her. She slashed the throats of the two nearest, then methodically began to butcher the rest. The leader went last. He begged for mercy, but by then mercy was no longer part of the young girl's vocabulary. She slit his stomach and left him clutching at his spilling entrails. Then she freed Colin and they left.

"Dearest God!" Cassana exclaimed, finally understanding, "This is a memory ring such as the Lifemages wear. It's trying to tell me what it is..." but its owner was murdered ... and the magic of the ring ... it's become warped ... the ring has become a nightmare... It will take a powerful Stone Reader or mage to interpret it. To get past the shock to the magic.

The strongest stonemages were always dwarves.

Cassana retrieved her riding gloves from the top drawer of a chest. Thus shielded she held each ring in turn to the light. Four names on the large silver rings: Darwryn, Minra, Aramesht and Frostry. A chill shook the Sharani: they were the four greatest Valdren lifemages. Somehow they had all been taken and slain. It was almost beyond belief. The small golden band must have belonged to an apprentice, for as it caught the light she could see the life rune and a name: Sohkoran.

Returning just the golden bands to a small leather pouch, Cassana tucked them inside her shirt and went looking for Tagalong. If anyone knew where to find a Stone Mage, it would be the dwarf. And a Stone Mage, Cassana thought with grim exultation, would be able to identify the murderer of the slain mages. "And damn Margren to Hell!"

\* \* \* \*

"The thieves guild ... it does not rent their people out," Hanadi explained, sitting on the floor with Brundarad draped across her like an oversized lap dog. "However, Tagalong Smith's name is known to them as it is to my people. So we have six volunteers, all female as you asked, who will personally report to Tagalong. They can fight if need be, are all good with a sling I am informed as well as a sly knife or two." Then she added, wryly, "Most of the underworld owes that one debts."

Aejys shrugged, stuffed her pipe, and lit it. She sat in her big wing chair, puffing thoughtfully. "They understand they are not to steal anything until I give them their orders in Rowanslea?"

"Tagalong has told them that."

"Good. Now how are we doing for supplies?"

"I have the six wagons loaded. We can purchase more, if need be, when we reach Vallimrah."

Aejys nodded.

\* \* \* \*

The greensward beyond the walls of Vorgensburg stood ablaze with color: blue tents dominated the area; while arriving units of Redbeard's crimson-clad mercenaries wheeled and turned, putting their horsemanship on display. They scattered the little knots of onlookers with a series of mock charges. Tagalong, watching from her tent door, scowled, and then shrugged. "Redbeard knows how to make an entrance..."

Hanadi's people had arrived six days ago, settling in so quietly, almost invisibly, that the citizenry never realized they were anything save more members of Aejys Rowan's household. All save the lancers were passing themselves off as servants and laborers: the three cook's helpers, all of the drivers and hostlers, and assorted yeomyn. Tagalong liked that.

Droves of people replied to the proclamations tacked up around Vorgensburg, stating that Aejys was hiring for an expedition along the ancient north road through the wilderness to trade finally in Shaurone and Iradrim. The dwarf left Aejys' arms-master and his assistants in charge of weeding out the wheat from the chaff among the applicants: only a token few who could be vouched for by Aejys' staff would be accepted, but it looked good to the citizenry.

As she stepped back into her tent, Tagalong noticed that the far side of the tent closest to the next bulged oddly. Tagalong's head screwed around and her eyes narrowed as she tried to decide what was raising the bottom off the ground about six inches. She propped her fists on her hips and stalked over. Tagalong could see now that it appeared to be a big piece of dark brown cloth. So she dropped down and pulled at it.

A startled shriek answered her and the whole side heaved, making the tent sway. For a minute Tagalong thought it would come down on her. She ducked under the side, which now hung straight, to get clear before the whole thing fell and blundered into Clemmerick.

"I'll be stoned!" Tagalong exclaimed, seeing the ogre hunkered down between the tents, trying desperately to make his huge form as inconspicuous as possible. She squatted beside him, peering up into his face. "Clemmerick? What are ya doing?"

"Hiding," he whispered sheepishly, his eyes scanning the grounds from the narrow space between two tents.

"From who?" Tagalong demanded in a whisper, picking up on Clemmerick's tone and wondering who could possibly intimidate the huge fellow.

"Becca," he sighed, drawing the tavern-master's name out, his voice fading away to nothing.

"Why?" Tagalong rose from her squat with a snort, "Hmph!"

"She hit me with a broom ... was going to hit me some more but I ran."

Tagalong suppressed an urge to laugh, struggling to keep a straight face at the image of Becca beating Clemmerick who was easily three times her size. "Ya could have taken the broom away from her."

Clemmerick shook his head. "Then she would have started throwing things. Maybe slinging stones too." His voice started out normal, if somewhat soft, then started dwindling away again in shame and embarrassment. "You know she carries her sling in that belt pouch since you got her into pants?"

Tagalong nodded, "Thought I saw it pokin' out a bit."

"And – and I really cannot stand her being upset with me. Especially when I deserve it."

"How'd ya manage ta getter so mad at ya?"

Clemmerick flushed, wincing from Tagalong's gaze, his voice now almost inaudible, "North cellar's half empty."

"Whaoooo," Tagalong exhaled sharply. "Wondered where ya got enough booze ta get so drunk. She just now discover this?"

Clemmerick nodded. "Every time she needed something from the cellar this week I went for it. Every time I saw her start to go I rushed out and went instead. But then I had to fetch that string of horses from the pasturage at Heidlern Village and..."

"And she was waitin' fer ya when ya got back?"

Clemmerick nodded.

"Tell ya what. Let's go make peace between ya. It ain't gonna break us, but I don't want ta see it happenin' again."

"I promise. That is the first time I have ever been drunk. And it will be the last time."

\* \* \* \*

Eliahu stood in the shadows of the cook tent, watching Tamlestari pass on her way to check the new string of horses. He knew that the girl was a Reader, having watched her diagnose Aejys' wounds. So Eliahu deftly avoided close contact with the youth: with a touch she could discern the mage beneath his pilgrim's robes. While he knew that, like all Readers, she probably kept her shields up, nonetheless accidents could occur and he wanted to avoid his presence becoming known to whatever eldritch creatures, mages, sa'necari, and banewitches might owe allegiance to Margren brye Rowan. Any of them could be watching the camp or even have insinuated themselves into it as he had done.

"So that is the daughter of the Phoenix," he mused. From a scrying pool, Eliahu had watched Kalestari Delarwyn Desharen change into the fire-born bird to fight the Dragon of Waejontor in the battle that cost her life. He wondered if her daughter would have that same talent, seeing as how her great, great grandfather had been a fire-born who took on mortal form out of love for a Valdren woman. Fireborn genes recurred quite often.

\* \* \* \*

People ignored Josh or noticed him and then soon forgot him. They had long ago learned to think of him as the city sot and disregard everything about him; it was an unfortunate and oft-time tragic matter of his existence. But it also worked to his advantage at times. So while Eliahu watched Tamlestari, Josh watched Eliahu. Josh had had just enough liquor for the edge of his strange talents to kick in and he knew exactly what Eliahu was, though not yet who the pilgrim was. Could Eliahu be Abelard? It did not matter that Branch had said that the last of the Abelards was dead; there could always be one who had been missed. Josh knew nothing of magic or history and was afraid to reveal his ignorance by asking. And he could neither read nor write.

He purchased two meat pies from a vendor and settled under a tree at the edge of some bushes where he could better watch without being easily watched in turn. When Eliahu had moved off toward the edge, Josh rose and approached him obliquely, passing on the mage's right since he had noted that Eliahu was left handed. He knew, with that untaught instinct that alcohol brought out, that if this outland mage as going to throw magic at him, Eliahu would be forced to turn about. By then Josh intended to be back into the crowd.

"I know what you are," Josh hissed sharply without stopping long enough for Eliahu to become certain of what he looked like enough to identify him later. Josh had spent most of his life running away, but where Aejys was concerned he could not run – he had to follow.

\* \* \* \*

They met that night in Clemmerick's quarters in the stable loft. His bed, a pile of hay with blankets thrown over, lay against the far wall. A long table rescued from storage for the occasion dominated the makeshift room. A tarnished, somewhat bent bronze candelabrum sat at one end and a pair of candles at the other. The shadows of the gathering were thrown tall against the walls and the hay that framed them. They sat in old chairs, no two alike. Like the table they had been drawn from the storage rooms, mismatched leftovers from the storehouses Aejs had torn down to make way for the Ouroboros Inn adjacent to the Cock and Boar. Clemmerick fussed with the plates of leftovers on the middle of the table.

Grymlyken arrived first. Clemmerick had piled enough hay on his chair that he could comfortably look the tallest in the eyes. The ogre lifted the tiny warrior up and settled him in his place.

Josh arrived next: sober. A miracle to Clemmerick's mind. Clemmerick seated him next to Grymlyken. Becca, Tagalong, and Tamlestari arrived together. Cassana came last, accompanied by Hanadi who had called the meeting.

Cassana addressed them in serious formal tones. "Some of you," she nodded to indicate Tagalong, "may already know this. Most of you do not. But the basis of our difficulties in keeping Aejs alive will be this: Aejs swore an oath to do nothing whatsoever to harm Margrenan brye Rowan even in the slightest. What that boils down to is that Margren can draw sword on Aejs and Aejs will not defend herself. That is the binding of the vow. Her life is forfeit to Aroana God if she violates it. Aejs is and always will be ha'taren, a paladin of Aroana. If she violates that oath she will die, by her own hand if not by others. Honor would demand it. Therefore we must, if we have truly given our allegiance to Aejs, place our lives between her and her sister."

"I swore fealty to Aejs brye Rowan," Clemmerick said, "of life and limb and earthly worship. And she gave me a better life. She ordered me to remain behind and help Becca. So I'm going to disobey her and follow in case she needs me. I would rather have my liege lord alive than anything else."

"And I," said Josh. "I'm coming with you, Clemmerick. I don't know what I can do, but I'm sure I can do something."

"Me, too," said Grymlyken. He drew his sword and brandished it. "For Aejs!"

"Aejs doesn't want these three to abandon Becca and come," Tamlestari told them, a troubled light shone in her green eyes and worry put a twist in her mouth. "You will have to trail us. Can you do that?"

"I can," Josh said softly, shivering at the memory of how, after a couple of drinks he could see prints of any living creature like a glow. So much magic and all of it



twisted. But he had to go. He felt terrified of going, of trying to use those gifts, and just as desolate and frightened that something might happen to Aejs – the only reason he had for not walking out into the waves.

"Wait!" Becca almost shouted, her insides were tightening at the thought of doing without Clemmerick. "I love Aejs as much as the rest of you, but who will do my books when you are gone, Clemmerick? Who will toss out rowdy customers, Grymlyken?"

"Leave it ta Becca ta put herself first," grumbled Tagalong.

Becca glared, her slender hands clenching into fists. "I'm not! It will do Aejs no good to come back to a ruined household because I could not do it all myself."

"I could," Tagalong told her.

"I must have Clemmerick!"

"Aejs needs Clemmerick's muscle! Do your own damned books!" Tagalong spit back at her.

Becca looked stricken. All eyes fastened on her face, curious. "I – I can't read," she told them and wept in humiliation. "I cannot read. Damn it! Out here only the clerics and the upper classes learn to read. It was never anything to be ashamed of. But when Aejs and Tagalong came, bringing in all these outlanders who can, I – I wanted to be part of it."

The assembled group looked stunned, except for Cassana and Clemmerick who already knew.

"So ya didn't tell her..." Tagalong said. "And Aejs never thought ta ask. We tend ta forget these things. Everyone in Shaurone learns ta read. Even the boys. Even the poorest classes."

"You will learn," Cassana told her gently, rising from her chair to put a comforting arm around the seneschal.

"Ya hid it real well," Tagalong said, settling into her chair.

"Hire a cleric from one of your temples," Hanadi suggested, "Have him teach you to read and write."

"Put him on the payroll," Tagalong said. "Take it outta my part. I guess I owe ya that much."

"I'm the only one of my people going," Grymlyken told her. "You'll still have plenty of bouncers."

\* \* \* \*

"Still, Brundarad, I am not satisfied," Hanadi rummaged in a saddlebag for pen and paper as she spoke. She laid them out on her parlor table, then went to the windows and threw them wide.

Brundarad yawned and stretched, scratching around his horns with his hind leg. Yet his emerald eyes never left his companion, their bright intelligence rivaling her own. He did not have to pretend to be a simple animal when they were alone and could be himself. The shadowhounds had escaped extinction during the wars of the Age of Burning by pretending to be creatures of less than sapient wisdom and intellect.

"Call your birds, Brundarad!" Hanadi ordered curtly.

The shadow hound stretched again, then settled on his haunches and threw back his head. An eerie, ululating howl slid from his throat. Everyone in the Cock and Boar, everyone in Vorgensburg heard it and, except for those who had seen the shadow hound, they wondered what kind of creature could possibly make such a sound.

These days duty gave Brundarad and his mate so little time to be alone together and even alone, their moments of intimacy were becoming severely cut short by the needs of trying to out plan the enemy. Still, he decided to make the suggestion to her. He reared up; his strange double paws coming to rest lightly on her shoulders. He nuzzled her neck and throat, pulling the headscarf off and letting it fall to the ground. Hanadi flushed as her dark hair tumbled down. She shivered at his questing touch, the hot breath on her throat. His secondary paws lengthened into hands with long, well-shaped fingers and he deftly released the upper buttons of her blouse. Hanadi's shivering became violent trembling as Brundarad's muzzle moved lower. She reached for his horns to press him further into intimate regions.

The sound of wings and the shrill questioning of hawks interrupted them.

"No," she said abruptly. "First business. Later pleasures. When assignment ends, it will be time for our wanderyear. So look forward to that and be patient."

Three large deep brown hawks with white barred wings sat patiently on the window ledge. Brundarad sighed. He dropped to all fours; his secondary paws resuming their usual form. Then he curled up beneath the table while Hanadi quickly penned a short letter.

Archer,

We must figure all our angles. Is it possible to take out Margrenan brye Rowan before we arrive? What risks are involved? Is there danger to our people if we do this? Will it rebound on Aejiystrys brye Rowan if we do? Aejiystrys is bound by a death oath to do no harm to Margrenan. What is the situation?

## Windhawk

Hanadi folded the letter small and snugged it to the hawk's body with a supple leather harness.

"Send him to Wilstryne, Brundarad," she told the shadow hound.

Brundarad rose and addressed the hawk in a series of eerie whining noises that rose into a low howling. The hawk shook himself, spread his wings, and flew out the window. The other two dispersed into the night.

Hanadi watched them go, her face thoughtful. Then she crossed into the bedroom. Brundarad followed, thinking about how nice it would be when their wanderyear came and they could stop being two different species for a time. Hanadi dropped her blouse by the bed, loosened the lacings of her pants, and lay down. Brundarad rumbled happily. He reared up, his form altering very subtly: his hind legs lengthened to a semblance of human, coated in steel gray hair, and his huge maleness emerged from the gray thatch between them. In just that much could he alter his form and no more. So he was still more beast than man as he mounted her, but he was man enough for his mate where it counted.

\* \* \* \*

Thomas Cedarbird's office caught the morning light through four wide, tall windows, flooding it with gold from the west. Diamond paned skylights lined the east ceiling above a mirrored wall. At all times of day the room seized and reflected all the sunlight that could be captured. Thomas had always loved the sunlight, spending all the time he could growing up in the outdoors. When he inherited his maternal grandfather's shipping business and saw that he would need to spend the majority of his time indoors working, he hired a talented architect to bring the outdoors in. Rare plants thrived in deep boxes along the windows and dwarf trees grew in huge pots in the corners. His desk, a table, and three over-stuffed, claw-footed chairs nestled in the center of the lush greenery.

He looked up at his amanuensis's distinctive knock, laying aside his quill as Darlbret ushered in a tall strapping youth in guardsmyn's gear. Two servants still fussed over the syndic's braids and the proper pinning of two eagle feathers in the right one.

Thomas Cedarbird dismissed them with a wave. Aejs would not make any trading contacts that he could not duplicate or better, if he had any say in the matter and this new expedition sounded potentially quite lucrative. Furthermore, if he could frustrate her enough, maybe she would give up being a merchant and let him make her king of Vorgensburg. At least, he comforted himself, she had finally admitted that he was right; she was the Lion of Rowanslea.

Cedarbird leaned forward, inspecting the stalwart young mon. He certainly looked

the part of a caravan guard. "You are certain he is the right one, Darlbret?"

"Absolutely sir," Darlbret said. "Took first at swords in last year's spring equinox festival."

"Your name?"

"Briarmottë, sir," the youth replied with a polite dip of his head and shoulders.

Cedarbird smiled approvingly, this one had his manners in good shape. "Then you are good with that blade you carry?"

"Yes, sir. And with ax and bow too."

"Your loyalties?"

"To Vorgensburg and you, Sir."

"How long have you been in my household?"

"Five years, Sir,"

"And your lineage?"

"Beltrian. My father was master of archers to Duke Aaron. He died in the war and my mother came here to live with her brother."

"And this uncle is?"

Darlbret flushed, turning away to conceal it.

Cedarbird glanced from one to the other, a slow amused smile stealing across his face. "Is Darlbret your uncle?"

"Yes, sir," the young man answered, frowning perplexedly.

Cedarbird looked from the diminutive amanuensis to the strapping swordsmen and back again laughing softly. "Had you told me, Darlbret, I would never have believed you. Yes, Briarmottë, you are the right one for the job."

Cedarbird opened his desk drawer, taking out a round stone white as cream in the center and black as night around the outside.

"Eye of Darkness," the youth gasped.

"No," Thomas Cedarbird corrected, smiling approvingly at the young man's knowledge, "Eye of Light. The eye here is white. This is a Kwaklahmyn speaking stone. We make them from the Eyes of Light. Very rare, very precious." Cedarbird

took another, matching stone from the drawer and laid it beside the first. "This one is for you to carry for the duration of your assignment. Call my name into the stone and I will hear you. We will set a time later for us to converse each evening. I want to know all about the trading in this new region.

"I want to know what they need and want, what they have to sell that I might want, anything that could prove useful. I will see that you have enough gold to bring back samples, impress the citizens and so forth. For now you will go down and enlist as a soldier in Aejys Rowan's guard for this expedition of hers."

\* \* \* \*

Six knights and a ha'taren clad in nondescript black, clan and rank markings discretely absent save for the silver Aroanan Rune hanging from a braided chain around the paladin's neck, waited for dawn outside the gray-brown city walls of Armaten. They stood, reins in hands, prepared to mount and ride in as soon as the gates opened. Ladonys could have ordered the guards to admit them through a side gate. She chose not to for the same reason she did not wear her colors: she had come to see Wilstryne and did not want her presence made known to Margren's spies and creatures.

The winds, which had howled all night, diminished to a breeze as light broke in the east: autumn was coming early in Shaurone, earlier than anyone could remember. It whipped their heavy cloaks about their shoulders and their long dark hair, which hung from beneath their helms.

As the light broke fully the guards pushed the creaking bronze gates open. If finding the knights waiting outside surprised, they did not show it: The small band mounted and rode in without comment from the guardsmyn. The city was just waking up. Tradesmyn passed them. A housenanny prodded along a gaggle of children of assorted sizes carrying slender leather-bound journals which marked them as day students at one of the temple schools: they learned to read and write by painstakingly copying the classics letter by letter. That meant all families, even the poorest, had books on their shelves.

Ladonys pulled her cowl hood around her face, watching cautiously about her while not allowing anyone to get a clear enough view of her to identify her later. Her knights followed her into the yard of an inn in the tradesmyn quarter of the city. She dismounted. They waited for her to alight before leaving their saddles. Ladonys arn Rowan gave a nod. The knights went to their work with military precision: they had all made this journey with Ladonys before. One knight took the horses and headed for the stable. Another preceded Ladonys into the inn, while the other four formed up around her.

Ladonys took her usual bench in the far north corner near the side door, which led into an alley. She leaned her heavy elbows on the simple trestle table and bent her

head as if in prayer. The innkeeper's daughter brought food and drink. Satisfied that the area was secure, the knights joined their liege ajan at the table and began eating. They had belonged to Ladonys' small personal household since before she married Aejs. Ladonys lifted her plate and began to fork long strips of steak swimming in cream gravy onto it when her fingers brushed paper just under the rim. She pulled it free and saw Wilstry's seal upon it.

The paladin opened it and read:

Surely, old friend, you did not think you could surprise me? I meant to send for you. I've more word on Aejs. I've already made arrangements for supper. Lenoreth will meet you in the Market Square just past the noon hour and escort you here.

Archer

\* \* \* \*

In the late morning, Ladonys and her companions went to the Square. She wanted to buy things for Laeoli, something to distract her, if only for an instant from her grief at the death of her sire and the loss of her wynderjyn. Ladonys could have dealt with it better had Laeoli gone to pieces or given way to lamentation; but the girl was too much like her ma'aram and had pulled inside herself rather than give expression to it.

The Aroanan Rune hanging from her neck prompted those who saw it to give way before her; but her cloak, shifting in the wind, tended to cover it more often than not. As Ladonys pushed through a particularly crowded pathway, she felt a light tug on her money pouch. Her hand shot out with more speed than might be suspected from her big frame, snagging a struggling urchin. The slender girl, her dark hair sun-streaked to a sparrow's wing brown, swiveled in Ladonys' grasp and swung hard at the paladin's head.

"Hey! Let go of me, you big gritch! Let go of me!" She swung and kicked furiously, but ineffectually, at the big woman. "I'll beat the crap out of you, I will!"

Ladonys, her mouth screwed up in wry speculation, regarded the youth who weighed less than a fraction of the paladin's weight, and probably did not even come up to her chin. Ladonys lifted her completely off the ground and held her thrashing in her grasp like a frantic fish on the end of a line.

The knights gathered about their liege waiting for some sign to action. A crowd had begun to gather, watching the spectacle, and the knights pushed them back a little. Ladonys lifted the youth still higher and a voice from the watching crowd shouted, "Birdie's at it again!"

"What kind of a little compassie have you caught there?" One of the knights asked, pulling off her gloves and folding them through her belt.

The youth's cheeks darkened and she shrieked, "I'm not a compassie! You stupid white feathered gritching gutter screw! Climb out of that armor and fight me fair. I'll beat you up!"

Ladonys sighed. "Cut-purse," she said, reaching down the front of the youth's shirt and retrieving her money pouch.

Birdie blinked. "I found it on the ground! I didn't steal anything!"

Just then another youth darted between the paladin's companions and slammed into Ladonys' legs staggering her. She lost her grip on Birdie and in trying to hold onto her while grabbing at the newcomer they all went down in a tangle of arms and legs.

"No!" Birdie shrieked in near panic, "Lizard, don't! Run, Lizard!"

But it was already too late. As Birdie scooped up Ladonys' pouch and ran for safety, the paladin caught Lizard by the leg. Trying to get a better grasp on the new youth she shifted her hold to Lizard's thigh and tunic, and as she did so the edge of her hand brushed Lizard's groin. Ladonys gasped in amazement, her grip loosened and Lizard, jerking frantically, escaped.

Aroana, my dear God, that one's a boy, she thought.

"Shall we pursue, mei ajan?"

"No," Ladonys sighed. "You'll never catch them. My friend will know where to find them."

\* \* \* \*

Wilstryne kept a tall, three-story wood and brick house in the merchants quarter, painted white and trimmed in dark brown. The assassin chieftain pulled the shutters closed while Ladonys settled herself on the couch. Wilstryne poured wine and handed the paladin a glass.

Ladonys swirled the blood-red wine, letting it catch the candlelight in that otherwise dark room. "You have news of Aejeys?"

Wilstryne nodded. "Aejeys is healing. She plans to march in around a week."

"Her wounds ... you said they were serious."

Wilstryne's mouth slid into a wry, impatient expression. "Hmph," she snorted. "You should know Aejeys better than I. All through the war she never let wounds and injuries slow her down. She's stubborn. It's probably a miracle she hasn't stubborned herself to death yet."

"Do you know who she is bringing with her?"

"A small army."

Ladonys quirked an eyebrow.

"Huh!" Wilstryrn snorted, "about five score. A sizeable escort and all veterans."

"How can she afford this? What could she have promised them?" So far as Ladonys knew, Aeijys had left without money and it would have cost several chests of gold to hire so many. Or if they were part of her household, to support so many.

"That story about the wyrm's treasure..."

"It's true?"

"Yes. Money talks," Wilstryrn shrugged, "and her reputation says the rest. There are thousands of masterless soldiers and warriors, even some ha'taren, scattered through the outlands. And all of them would give an eye to become part of the Lion of Rowanslea's household."

Wilstryrn poured herself another glass and sat down in a claw-armed chair facing Ladonys.

"How do you know all this?"

"Trade secret," replied Wilstryrn, "now it is your turn to answer my questions."

Ladonys stared into her glass, released a heavy breath, "Is this necessary?"

"If we want to keep Laeoli alive. That is what you came for isn't it?"

Ladonys nodded weary acquiescence. "Ask."

Wilstryrn searched Ladonys' face, wondering just how much the big ha'taren had kept from her concerning Laeoli, deciding to ask something important, but hopefully less painful. "Will they let her be consecrated? Even though her wynderjyn is dead?"

"Yes, she will still be ha'taren."

"Now tell me again about the poisoning." Wilstryrn had thought long on this, a cold rage deepening within her: Margren had taken her only son and was now trying to take her beloved godchild also.

Ladonys' expression darkened and her mouth tightened into a thin line. "Every year since she turned ten, when the time neared for the youths and younger children to be



taken up to the High Meadows, Laeoli fell ill, too ill to go. The Readers could find nothing. This year High Priest Sonden got curious as to why Laeoli had never come for the bond-blessing. Sonden is nothing if not perceptive. Very few realize it, but he is one of the most powerful Readers in Shaurone. He took Laeoli to the temple, placed her in a room adjacent to his own where no one could reach her without his knowledge. Then for several days he Read her again and again. And he found it. Someone had poisoned Laeoli. He can't say what kind of poison it is, only that he's found something in her system that shouldn't be there. Not enough to kill her, the lesser Readers would have found that."

"And she would have been dead..." Wilstryl interjected.

"Just enough to make her too ill to bond. And he found the residue of past such poisonings in some of her cells."

"Margren." Wilstryl gave a snarling hiss.

"I believe so," Ladonys answered. "Margren claims that Aejys prevented her from bonding. So it makes sense that Margren would try to prevent Aejys' blood child from doing so also."

Wilstryl nodded, sipping again from her glass. "Makes sense. Now, tell me again how Esreth died. She should have been very safe in the High Meadows. But I have heard rumors since we last spoke."

Ladonys frowned. "Laeoli and Esreth had an intuitive bonding. Not the speaking kind like Aejys and Gwyndar. Even with sylvan blood, the speaking kind is rare."

"I know." Wilstryl reached out, covering Ladonys' hands with her own. She could feel a trembling in Ladonys' body that she could not see.

"Laeoli woke screaming just before dawn. Sonden had instructed the priest and the bradae, the temple warriors, to watch her close. He was worried the bonding would put her in danger."

"It would take great power or influence to reach those grounds."

Ladonys nodded. "They went to the stables with her. Nothing was disturbed, not even the wynderjyns in the next stalls. Nothing was heard, or sensed, or seen. Not even the slightest emanation of dark magic. Yet someone or something ripped the animal's throat out. It gave her nightmares for weeks."

Wilstryl drew her hands back, stood and paced for a minute, thinking. "It's like a veil of silence was thrown there."

"It would have left a residue. The priests and bradae should have at least found a residue. Hell! Sonden, himself, found nothing."

"There's no place in Rowanslea Margren cannot reach her. God's Blood! No place in the entire kingdom!"

"Kaethreyn will not allow us to send my child out of the Mar'ajante. That's why I came to you. You are the only one who can keep Laeoli alive until Aejys gets here."

"If Aejys gets here. Who knows what Margren will throw at her." Wilstryne pulled her chair to Ladonys' side, putting an arm around her shoulders. "Old friend, I dearly love my godchild, but I don't believe that I can keep her alive either."

"But we have to try..."

"Yes. We have to try."

Ladonys pulled all the rings, save her signet, from her fingers and shoved them across the table to Wilstryne. "I lost my money pouch to a cut purse in the market square, but I think this should cover your expenses."

Wilstryne lifted a heavy golden ring set with bright blue sapphires and a large square cut ruby. "This alone, my friend, is worth a Saer'ajan's ransom. How did you come by it?"

"Aejys sent it."

"And how did you know it was Aejys? Was there a note?" Wilstryne asked suspiciously.

"Laurelyanne, Laeoli's sire's mater brought it. Now what do we do about Laeoli?"

Wilstryne slid the sapphire ring back, picked through the rest of the rings, and chose out four. "My best suggestion is we fake her death and she runs away. I hide her outside the kingdom until Aejys gets here. They will not look so far afield if they think they are looking for her dead body as they would if they knew she was alive."

"Now, about your lost money. I think you should speak to Blackbird about that. The urchin that robbed you is her daughter."

\* \* \* \*

Dane went to Mephistis about Rose after weeks of watching Isranon worry over her. The youth tried not to show it and he never spoke of it, but Dane had a sharp eye for those things. The young male intrigued Dane with his intricate complexities of hard and soft, naïve and at times experienced and worldly as a soldier. Dane could see all the places where Isranon's nature was like a thick quilt with holes in it.

He settled into a chair in Mephistis' outer chamber, propped his ankle on his knee

and leaned forward. "Isranon is in love with a nibari."

Mephistis poured wine and carried a glass to Dane before sitting down with his own. "He has not said anything. I cannot say that I am surprised either by his choice or his silence. Who does she belong to?"

"She's a common. And you know very well why he hasn't said anything."

"I said it did not surprise me. He rejects his own kind. I would give her to him, but it would be seen as sign of greater regard than the others want to see for one who has not earned it. Margren already plagues me endlessly about him. And then there is Bodramet and his coterie who are demanding favors for remaining faithful."

"So you could not take her for your own?"

"Not easily. Nor give her to him with him unblooded in the rites. They smell the oddity in him."

Dane sipped from his glass and nodded. "They call him half-a-mon, and pressure him for nibble games. He'd rather die than be touched by them."

Mephistis smiled at that. "That is my Isranon. You know what he is?"

"Yes. I figured it out weeks ago."

"What if I gave her to you? For some small favor? You could hold her in trust until you departed and then give her to him?"

Dane considered this and nodded. "That would work. She could move in with my private herd. I would mark her."

While Dane had no rank among the sa'necari and was treated with a bit of contempt because of his being one of the undead; the sa'necari were also hesitant to push him too far, suspecting that he came of Brandrahoon's lineage – the Lemyari, demon vampires. The sunlight held no dangers to them and they carried a venom in their nails that killed swiftly depending upon how many fingers they got into their opponent, how swiftly and whether it went into an artery. All very messy and powerful. Brandrahoon, eldest brother of Waejonan, had been a sylvan mage of half divine blood, turned by a demon. Dane was very, very old. No one knew how old and he was not telling. He preferred to allow the sa'necari to wonder, rather than to know anything at all about him.

"Go find her. She is yours. Now go. I have matters to attend to. The situation in Vorgensburg has changed recently and I have as little reason as Margren to wish her sister reaching Rowanslea alive."

## CHAPTER SIX. WITHIN THE HEART OF DARKNESS

A tall young mon, her features concealed by a heavy cowl, stepped from the shadowed alcove near the stairs as Ladonys passed leaving the Guild chieftain's home. Wilstryr heard her before she saw her, for the mon approached from Wilstryr's blind side. Wilstryr stood very still, waiting for the newcomer to identify herself or come within striking distance. She had trained her ears to substitute for the missing eye. Twin stilettos slid into her hands at a soft flexing of her muscles.

"It's Talons, Archer." the young mon's voice had a hard edge. She wore all black from her great boots to her cowed cloak and gloves. A bandoleer crossed her body carrying six throwing knives. Two long knives, nearly the length of short swords hung from the belt around her waist. But her deadliest weapon did not show. Beneath her black gloves lay magical gauntlets as supple as leather, undetectable, capable of materializing long runed tiger claws made from kenda'ryl, the magic metal, and then glazed with silver. Wilstryr was one of the very few, outside of the Grand Master himself, who knew of them. They had given the mon her name.

Wilstryr sheathed her blades. With a curt sign, she indicated the woman should follow. They entered the study that Ladonys had so recently departed. The newcomer went to the bar and poured herself a straight whiskey, knocked it down and turned. She met Wilstryr's eye; held it for a significant moment. "Ranlyn's dead."

"Damn!" Wilstryr gritted between clenched teeth.

"She was getting close. She must have gotten too close." Talons' glance was cold as stone, utterly composed and controlled. At barely nineteen she had twenty kills to her credit, all difficult extractions requiring the utmost care, planning and cleverness in their execution. It had required calling in all her favors for Wilstryr to obtain Talons' services: Normally Talons worked for the Grand Master alone.

"Talons, figure out what she did last and where she went."

"Margrenan Rowan is a dangerous woman, Archer. She'll be hard to bring down," Talons said softly, adding, "You knew that when you started this."

Wilstryr sat down, nodding for her agent to sit. She slid the charm across the table.

The agent's dark eyes widened with amazement, then narrowed as the full impact showed on her face for an instance before vanishing. "What does this mean?" she hissed, suspecting the answer, waiting for Wilstryr's confirmation.

"Margrenan brye Rowan killed my son. That's what it means," Wilstryr snarled. "I also got word from a stonemage who read Sohkoran's life ring. Margren ritually disemboweled him to Read his entrails while he still lived... Drank his blood..." Wilstryr fought to keep her voice steady, but it was breaking up as she spoke. "Put

a blade through his heart..."

The agent's mouth tightened and her eyes closed as the horror sank in: the Guildsmyn made clean kills, they did not torture; they killed those who needed killing, for a price and in accordance with the strictures of their religion, as a sacrifice to their liege-god, Hadjys the Dark Judge. She remembered Sohkoran's gentle laughter, his innocence, how she and the others had bounced him on their knees as a babe. "Why don't you just take her out? It would be a suicide run. But we all loved Sohkoran. You'd have volunteers. I – I would be honored to die for him."

Wilstryn stared, incredulous at the offer – she had always thought Talons a stone-killer, impervious, unfeeling, relentless. Then she shook her head. "Aejys would take the fall for it. I owe her my life several times over. We've got to do this carefully. I've begun a list of her allies and servants. She's got a citadel on Dragonshead. Find it."

"You think she's found a way into the underground ruins?"

"I know it."

The agent rose with a curt nod. "Then I'll find it." She flicked her cloak of darkness around her, disappearing into the shadowed hall. Wilstryn heard the door close with almost inaudible softness.

She sat for a long time in silence, staring grimly at nothing. She wondered how many of her agents would die before she could safely slam the nails into Margren's coffin.

She had uncovered one fact she had not shared at that meeting weeks ago: the Gold Ravens stalking her people were Waejontori; part of a newly established cell in Rowanslea. Wilstryn had meant to make it known, but her eldest two daughters, Laeth and Sorrow, had dissuaded her. Sitting there in the wake of Talons' departure, Wilstryn began to question that advice. What if Talons' lack of that information cast her into more danger than even she could handle? But it was already too late, for Wilstryn had no way of contacting her – that was the way Talons worked.

Then Sohkoran's sweet young face filled her head. Sometimes she could almost hear his voice, feel the nearness of his spirit. She folded her arms on the table and pressed her face into them to muffle her weeping lest her daughters hear her. She did not want her sorrow added to theirs' lest it provoke them to desperate actions; some fool's errand that would cost their lives and gain nothing.

\* \* \* \*

She sat with her back wedged into the corner of an L-shaped fragment of wall, sheltered from the high winds by the willow's long branches draped over the ruins. Margren stared up at the full moon, pulling her heavy wool cloak tighter around her.

It was a bad night to be outside, but worse inside where her thoughts seemed to rebound and multiply against the walls. She had been asleep until the nightmarish loneliness of her dreams awakened her. None of the techniques of mind or magic she had learned so well could push the loneliness and feelings of abandonment away.

She had dreamed again of the way the courtiers, people she had called friends, swiftly deserted her every time Aeijys came home. She stood, basking in their affections, speaking at length on philosophy, music and art or she played her mandolin, singing to their praise, she had always had a gifted hand and a sweet voice. Then Aeijys would appear and suddenly she was speaking to the cold empty air. What did they see in Aeijys, whose only talents were swords and war? Loneliness cut deeper than a sword.

Margren shivered and it was not from the wind and cold, but from her heart. Aeijys liked taking it all away from her or she would not have prevented Margren from bonding with a wynderjyn colt she tried to rescue from a snare. Everyone said she had deliberately set the snare to force a bond from gratitude when she released the animal. "But I didn't. I didn't!"

As irrational as she knew it was, she could not stop from feeling that even in death Aeijys would return to take everything away again. And Laeoli, as well, she was taking it all away now too. Laeoli was the heir and the heir was more important than Margren could ever be – ever would be. A wordless shriek of despair and pain rolled up through her throat and broke into the night where the wind swallowed it up as if it had never been.

"Everyone," she sobbed. "All love Aeijys and Laeoli. No one loves me! I hate them! I hate them... I..." And now there were times when she believed that Isranon was stealing Mephistis from her. It was all too much! If Isranon... No! She could not bear to think on that at all.

"That isn't true you know, my love," said the smooth, deeply masculine voice from just outside the willow curtain. "Hate them if you will, but don't say you are not loved." A slender dark man with a long narrow face, a tiny black wisp of a beard on his chin, knelt and parted the willows. He crawled into the rude shelter beside her.

Margren opened her arms, letting her cloak slip back and he slid into them. In the darkness his slanted deep violet, sa'necari eyes could not be seen. "Mephistis," Margren's voice cracked as she fought back another round of tears. He had come looking for her. Surely that meant he cared?

Mephistis took her face in his hands, kissing away the tears, his mouth moving lower until his lips met hers. His questing tongue pushed hungrily between her lips, reaching deeply, then twining with her tongue. Margren's hand slipped down his body to caress his cherished hardness, fumbling with the hooks of his trousers. Then her hands were inside, lifting him out, caressing him, guiding him inside her to

the place of ecstasy. Their bodies moved together in a single rhythm as he thrust deeper and deeper, in and out. Margren moaned softly, her fingers digging into his back, her legs fastening around his buttocks, tighter and tighter. Her womanhood sucked him, clenching, throbbing with need. She climaxed as his seed erupted within her.

Margren lay in his arms for time uncounted; the warmth of their bodies pressed together defeated the worse efforts of the wind to chill them. Her loneliness was dispelled as if it had never been.

"Swell my belly," Margren hissed the crude phrase. "Give me a child. Fill me with your seed until there's no room for more." Her hands slid down his hard lean body, caressing him again to hardness. She raised her legs straight up, wrapping her arms around them in the clamshell position. "Service me, stud," she whispered in a low, sensual tone. Mephistis locked his arms around her arms and legs, his cock pressing against the sweet wet lips of her womanness. He entered gently at first, finding his way to the place of ecstasy. Margren moaned as he touched it, crying out as he struck deeper and harder.

So they sped the hours until dawn.

\* \* \* \*

Blackbird's house stood in the poor quarter of the city, a ramshackle three story wood structure desperately in need of repairs that the crippled knight could not make herself and little money to pay for on her modest pension. She could have lived in relative comfort in Castle Rowan, but chose not to. She had been badly crippled, saving Mar'ajan Kaethreyn's life from an assassin's knife in an attack that cost her the use of her right arm and hand as well as damaging her left leg. Still she lived where she wished with her mates and their seven children, paying her way with money from the small pension Kaethreyn had given her.

The older children had begun the repairs, but they were young and it was a lot of work even with their 'lasah's and sire's help. Then their 'lasah had taken ill with a degenerative disease the healers could not cure. And they could not afford a lifemage, even were there any left in the city which there were not. So the repairs went unfinished.

Battered, threadbare furniture filled the front room of the old house: A long couch with its legs missing stretched beside a door leading deeper into the house. Two ragged over-stuffed chairs stood near a window, some of the original embroidery still showed, faded beige against dark rose, the seats worn through at the edges and middle, straw stuffing poking through. Birdie and Lizard were lounging on a long faded gray couch when Ladonys entered with two of her knights. Lizard went out the window with a yelp, but Birdie stood her ground, shouting for her ma'aram.

"That warrior tried to kill me is here! She's gonna cut my head off... And I didn't do

anything to her!" Birdie stood, hands defiantly propped on her hips, "Touch me and I'll beat the crap out of you," she hissed at Ladonys.

"Who?" A rough voice came from the narrow hallway, coming closer. Blackbird limped heavily into the room. She was a large, broad woman once heavily muscled, but now going to fat. Her face was battered and scarred, but her eyes still had fire in them. She saw Ladonys and smiled widely. "Shut up, Birdie!" She limped across the room, throwing her good arm around Ladonys who responded warmly.

"Blackbird, you old bitch! Seven kids!"

"Better'n you you old sack of troll bait."

Birdie stood agog and fully at a loss for words, realizing she had ripped off one of her ma'aram's oldest friends.

"Birdie, close your mouth 'fore you catch flies and fetch a bottle of the good stuff. Some glasses too."

The girl bolted the room. She ran up the stairs to the tower cell at the top where she slept. She only dispersed their takings once a month during a ritual worship service she conducted during the full moon. Otherwise every bag and piece of booty rested within a small chest on her altar to the God of Cussedness, Perverse Dynanna. Dynanna, although a minor deity, always listened closely to rebels, thieves, and curmudgeons as well as to outcasts in general and frequently responded. She even blessed their loot so that they would never be caught and would always invest it wisely.

It was her own fault, not Dynanna's, that she had chosen the wrong patsy. She retrieved Ladonys' purse with its contents untouched, shoving it in her pocket. "Forgive me, Dynanna, but this one is a return to sender."

Soft inhuman laughter echoed through the room and Birdie winced: she really hated it when the God laughed at her.

Then she rushed down to the wine cellar, bringing up a bottle of Iradrim whiskey a case of which she had stolen from a local vendor. She snatched glasses from the kitchen, swishing into the front room where she set every thing out, poured for them and then plopped Ladonys' money pouch next to her drink.

Ladonys laughed. Birdie flushed and fled.

Blackbird nodded at her retreating back. "My oldest, Birdie. Then there's Jysy, Arruth, Mathryn, Tomlyn and Tomyrean, they're twins, full blood twins, can you imagine the luck? And then ... then my prize, Mauritius, my son. Conceived year the curse ended. Of course I've some strays and add-ons living with us, like Lizard. Lizard is a good one, she is."



"Lizard's a boy," Ladonys said sharply.

"Ah, so you know that, do you?" Blackbird said softly. "If you haven't already, please keep it to yourself. Lizard's an orphan, got no one. Makes him slaver bait, scoopable material to any noble or moneybags that spies him. Older sister escaped with him when their village got massacred, but not before they saw all the other children butchered. She died on the walls of Armaten, fighting the Waejontori. Most of the Market Street Urchins got similar stories to tell. War was Hell."

Ladonys nodded, sitting in silence, remembering her own military engagements with Waejontori forces that had broken through to the gates of Rowan City; how Aejs had been brought home to die and somehow lived. "Market Streets Urchins?"

"Birdie's gang. She leads them." Blackbird gave her a shrewd glance, "They do no real harm..."

"Except thieving."

"Yah, a bit. But they see and hear a lot, information in the right hands fetches a good price, if you take my meaning, old friend. I think you could use more ears just now."

Ladonys considered that, she could turn a blind eye on their escapades and get something in return that might save her own daughter. "I could use them, yes."

"Then we can work something out?"

"Yes."

Blackbird heaved a great sigh of relief and refilled their glasses.

\* \* \* \*

Drapes covered the wide windows, keeping out the light. Margren liked the darkness. It felt cool and soothing; safe and hidden. She liked small places rather than open areas full of light such as the Market Square and her ma'aram's Great Hall, but she coped with them. No one suspected how vulnerable such places made her feel. The curtains of her great bed were parted slightly. She turned over, closing them, making it even darker and more womb-like.

"There has been no word from Vorgensburg in nearly a month, Margren," purred the soft voice of Mephistis.

Margren turned back to her lover, stroking his slender boyish figure. He came and went through the portal he had opened at the head of her bed, between their secret citadel at Dragonshead and her bedroom. The one place no one would look for an

enchantary-gate. Mages might have sensed it, but Margren had long ago eliminated all mages from her ma'aram's household.

When Margren informed her ma'aram that she and her mate, Juldrid, had chosen to use a male from one of the stud-houses to get a child, Kaethreyn had been overjoyed at the thought of having more grandchildren: though she would have preferred a formal triading as Aejys had done. Had she known the true nature of the male Margren coupled with she would have been horrified, perhaps enough to disown her. But Kaethreyn would never know.

She ran her fingertips suggestively over his body. "Then Farendarc failed. Aejys must have found our operatives and killed them all."

"We must take stronger measures, my love." Mephistis waited for her to make the decision he had already made for her, playing with her, letting her have a few illusions of control and influence. He had received the birds four days ago telling him his brother was dead. The only thing he regretted about Farendarc's death was that he had not eaten him. Farendarc had been useful, but Mephistis had far more useful tools. His best pawn in Vorgensburg would be in hiding for months now, rendered useless by Farendarc's failure. Once in a while over many generations Waejonan's lineage produced a fool and Farendarc had been this one's. Let Margrenan worry for a moment and then turn to him.

Margren paused, thinking. "It will take her at least twelve weeks to reach Shaurone and another two to get here unopposed but that isn't going to happen. She's going to have to fight for every inch of ground she crosses." Margren pushed the Waejontori back, climbing on top of him. "Quicken my womb. Give Kaethreyn a new heir. I'm going to kill the one she has."

Mephistis Coleth smiled languidly. "As you wish."

Margren spread her legs, grasping his cock, guiding it in as she descended on it. She rode him hard and wild, taking all that she wanted. A small, pained sound escaped Mephistis, telling her she was being too rough, but she could not stop, she was filled with a savage exultation, grinding her hips and thighs into his body. A sudden bright fire erupted within her. Energy danced in every cell of her body, a golden glow of energy enveloped her and spread its burning power through her into Mephistis who writhed and screamed in pleasure so intense it hurt. "The kyndi! Juldrid! Juldrid, come here!"

Margren's na'halaef hesitated in the doorway. She had never before witnessed the burning light of the kyndi. Margren reached out to her. Tentatively, Juldrid started forward. Then she saw Mephistis; knowing him for what he was – sa'necari – he terrified her. For months now she had resisted their efforts to draw her into the sex play, frequently locking them both out of her rooms. Juldrid retreated from the room and Margren came after her. Margren quickly cornered her, capturing her hand. The

exquisite ecstasy of kyndi swept over her, shattering her resistance, yet she wept with terror as Margren pulled her to the bed, shoving her down. Already the mystical appendage was materializing between Margren's legs. Without preliminaries, Margren threw herself atop Juldrid. Juldrid, unprepared, screamed in fear and anguish as Margren forced her way into her body. She tried to scream again, but Mephistis mounted her mouth, his cock thrusting deep into her throat, choking her.

Juldrid gagged, trying to turn her head away. Mephistis clouted her with his fist, ripped away her shirt, and began to bite her nipples. "Suck you stupid bitch. Suck good!" Juldrid obeyed, tears streaming from her eyes. Margren continued to thrust the kyndi deeper and deeper into Juldrid's body until it seemed she would split the young minstrel's womb open. Lightning lanced through Juldrid and a weight settled in her womb like rocks in her stomach: the moments-old embryo had passed to her. Mephistis came in Juldrid's mouth, twisted around, and pinched her cheeks, forcing her to swallow it.

Juldrid curled into a fetal ball, sobbing.

"It's all right now, Juldrid," Margren said, stroking her head gently as if nothing terrible had happened. Then Margren kissed her hair and followed Mephistis out.

\* \* \* \*

Talons flicked her cloak of darkness around her, fading back beneath the pine shadows. Her heart hammered in her chest, pulse racing, breathing labored: She saw with the intense clarity of adrenaline flooding her system; every nerve and muscle ready to move instantly. She could hear her pursuit beating the bushes, trying to drive her out into the sunlit open where her cloak would be ineffectual. She dropped into a crouch, hearing someone approach from her left. A pair of black-clad legs went past her, paused. Talons checked. He was alone. She rose, coming silently behind and slightly to the side. With a thought she summoned the tigers-claws to her hands. Her first slashing attack took out his throat; he would not be calling for help. He staggered back, hands to his throat, making gurgling noises. She opened him up from breastbone to groin, catching him as he fell. She lowered him silently to earth. Except for the dragon and rowans charm around his neck, he wore no livery. She snapped the charm free, slipping it in her pocket.

Talons had seven of them now, more than enough proof that something dark and dangerous was happening on Dragonshead. She had not found the entrance to the chambers beneath, but after a day of searching they had found her. Now she had to get off the bluffs alive. She moved quickly down the overgrown path, back the way her pursuer had come, moving lightly, soundlessly on the balls of her feet, pausing repeatedly to listen.

Time was of the essence: she had overheard two stone trolls talking and knew that Wilstry'n's plan to have Laeoli run away had been discovered by the enemy. There

was a traitor in Wilstryn's ranks. Worse, when Ladonys and Laeoli rode to the hunt on the morrow, they would both die and Wilstryn with them, unless Talons could get off the bluffs and intercept them in time.

She could see the red-veined outcropping of gray stone marking the entrance to a narrow defile that Wilstryn's eldest daughters had mapped on their earlier reconnaissance searching for Sohkoran. It narrowed until a single person could barely squeeze through. It was there they had found his body. Laeth Hornbow had barely gotten through it and she was far more slender than Talons. The assassin hesitated, wondering whether to try it or attempt to cross the open again, making for a hunter's trace she had found a day ago.

A long howling began behind her, coming swiftly on. Gods in Hell! They had brought out the hounds. Her decision was made for her. Talons leaped, rolling into the stone mouth. She came to her feet, blades in hand drawn from her bandoleer. She scampered down the defile, moving as quickly as she could despite a broad carpeting of loose stones. The stone shifted and scraped beneath her feet, loose stones rattling down the steep path. "No way in hell to move silently," she muttered, grimly consoling herself with the knowledge that they would have to come at her one at a time and they would die one at a time.

She worked her way past a jutting edge of blade sharp stone. A rock turned under her foot, throwing her forward. She threw out her hands to save her face and a sharp fragment sliced her leathers, leaving a long gash down her right arm. "Gods shitting pig-cunts," Talons cursed, pulling a clean handkerchief from inside her tunic to quickly bind the cut without pausing in her retreat. There were bits of stone all through the wound, but she would have to pick them out later, praying it didn't infect.

The howling neared. Talons looked up to see the first hellhound racing toward her. She threw her blades. The first slender missile caught it in the shoulder, but the second entered its eye, driving deep into the creature's brain. Talons turned, moving as quickly as the narrowing stone walls would allow.

Again stones turned and she staggered, falling, this time into something soft and wet. Rancid odors assailed her, the smell of death. Maggots swarmed the rotted flesh inches from her nose. Talons came stumbling to her feet, her stomach heaving, bits of rotted flesh clinging to her, covering her in nightmarish filth. She glanced back, hearing the next hound coming on. "Gods in Haven," she muttered. rotting recent dead carpeted the defile. "Must be over a hundred..." She could stand and fight or wade through a sea of rotted flesh swimming with maggots.

The second hound slammed her in the back, knocking her face down into the filth. She twisted, rolling, bringing her claws into play. Teeth closed on her left shoulder, biting through her leathers. Her first swipe took out its eyes and her second its throat all in a single heartbeat. She threw the carcass off, rising again to jog through the

corruption. Several times, her gorge rose and she felt an urge to vomit, forcing it down again. Talons had killed many myn in her short years, but they had all been clean kills, in and then out again, never looking back at the aftermath of mortality.

The throbbing pain of her wounds cleared her head, forcing her to focus on escape, on taking that next step, leaving her no space for morbid musings. She could see that narrowest spot that Laeth Hornbow had written of in her notes. Talons slowed as she reached it, knowing at a glance that she was trapped: even if she stripped naked, she could not squeeze through. She scanned the walls. The gap widened near the top. She pressed her hands and back against the wall, then braced one foot and then the next against the opposite wall. She walked up the wall. When she reached a wide enough spot, she placed her feet on opposite sides of the cliff faces, moving now crab like above the narrows.

The setting sun offered her hope; for once it set, her cloak of darkness would hide her from pursuit. But her attackers did not give her that chance. Arrows flew about her. One struck her in the back, just below her left shoulder blade. She lost her grip, sliding and falling down, scrabbling at the rocks. She summoned her claws, scratching for small holds that slowed her fall a bit. Then she slipped again, twisting. Her back struck the wall, breaking the long shaft off and turning the head in her wound. Consciousness grayed out. She hit the bottom hard.

Strong hands gripped her, lifting her with a blade at her throat. A lantern was briefly unshielded and a familiar face looked into hers. "Talons?"

The knife was withdrawn, sheathed. "Talons?" The voice queried again, "Come on, kid, we gotta get out of here."

"We've wired it, Ma'aram," came a young girl's voice out of the darkness.

"You got the fuse lit, Lizard?" Birdie called.

"Uh huh."

Blackbird chuckled, "Knew those blasting powders would come in handy one day. Dwarves send things off with a bang. 'Bout two, three times as strong as Iradrim Fire. You've seen that blow." She shouldered Talons' weight with her good arm. "Lizard, Arruth, Jysy, I need some help, she's heavy. We gotta get outta here."

Each of the larger youths grabbed a limb, lifting Talons from every corner. They rushed around a nearby bend in the defile, crouching down and pressing against the wall. A tremendous roar filled the night as the entire defile shuddered and exploded. Rocks showered them, punctuated by screams of anguish and agony coming from back the way Talons had come.

The lantern was unshuttered again, lowered closer to Talons' face. One of the children lifted her head up as another brought a flask to her lips. Talons drank

gratefully, tasting the sweetness of holadil mixed with other things she did not recognize. Her pain eased enough for her to speak and she poured it all out to Blackbird, knowing her for an ally.

Blackbird nodded. "You got shifter troubles. We got one," she said, lifting a severed head from a bag. "If the kids'er right, ya got two more to deal with."

"Ladonys..."

"Don't know what to do about that. Urchins and I'll figure something out. I don't let people take out my friends."

Talons sighed, slipping into the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

"The wynderjyns rejected me," Margren said, sipping at her wine.

They sat in a small parlor. Heavy dark drapes, red-black like dried blood, closed out the midday sun. The delicately carved, high-backed chairs of imported ebony wood added to the feeling of darkness and stifling closeness. Juldrid, just weeks pregnant with Margren's child ached for sunlight. She remembered the days when Margren loved the sunlight as much as she; the ache grew keen and Juldrid wanted to weep. Mephistis Coleth, the child's sire, sat close beside her, reaching out now and again to stroke her. Juldrid shuddered, balling up. With Margren's help, he had raped her again on several more occasions. Finally Margren had removed the locks on Juldrid's bedchamber, giving him access whenever he wished, whether Margren was present or not.

More and more since Margren brought her to Dragonshead, her love for Margren had disappeared in her growing terror of the things Margren did there. Juldrid had been a minstrel's young, talented apprentice at Kaethreyn's court, gentle, and naïve, when she and Margren fell in love. The first four years had been intense and wonderful; then Margren encountered Mephistis and discovered the secrets of Dragonshead.

Juldrid had heard the story many times before, yet an expression of pained sympathy filled her delicate face. Juldrid's black hair, a heavy mass of long undisciplined ringlets, hung loose past her shoulders; a silver filigree circlet holding it back from her light bronze face. Her narrow face and fragile features were almost sylvan. Her eyes were large, black, and long-lashed.

"I had gone to the valley every summer since I was seven," Margren said, "and always something strange happened to cause them to reject me. Sometimes I didn't even get to leave the houses to try to bond. I cannot begin to go into the list of strange coincidences that prevented me from even gaining access to the yearlings. Finally, when I was twelve, His Holiness Sonden agreed to give me a last try.

"I could hear the yearling calling to me. It woke me from my sleep. I went out into the woods and found it tangled in netting. It was frightened. I drew my knife intending to cut it loose. Then two things happened. My sister, Aejs appeared out of nowhere. I suspect that she followed me to prevent my bonding. She knocked me down just as I was about to get the yearling free and when I got loose from her it was gone. I was heart broken and hysterical, knowing I would never be given another chance. But Aejs was not content. She struck me again and I cut her. I cut her several times to prevent her hurting me and then I fled. She convinced the bradae that I was not fit even for the knighthood and they sent me home in utter disgrace. I knew then that I would never be allowed to be whole or happy so long as Aejs lived. My sister would never allow it."

Mephistis leaned toward Margren, grasping her hand comfortingly. "She will never hurt you again, my heart, I – we will see to that."

Juldrid shivered again. She had never really known Aejs. First Aejs had been gone to the war. Then she was wounded and brought home to die from the death magic of the baneblades that had cut her. But she had lived through the efforts of a young lifemage and High Priest Sonden, one of the greatest Readers Shaurone had ever produced. Aejs did not stay to finish healing; fleeing with Tagalong Smith to parts unknown – until recently. The more frightened Juldrid grew of Margren, the more she wondered about Aejs.

\* \* \* \*

Talons woke in a small space surrounded by skillfully constructed blinds woven of fresh cut evergreens. A rough deer hide blanket covered her. Her good arm lay at her side, her wounded left resting in a crude sling atop the blanket. She looked up into the early morning sun thrusting sharp lances through partings in the branches, then around her, taking in the small enclosure. The remnant of a fire glowed in a rock-framed circle. Several packs, some leather, others canvas, lay along the west side.

A child's genderless face poked through a parting in the blinds. "Ma'aram! She's awake."

"So she is, Tomlyn." Blackbird pushed the child aside, slipping into the blind. The crippled woman bent over Talons, producing a flask.

"Holadil mostly," Blackbird answered Talons' questioning glance.

Talons shook her head. "Don't want it." She fumbled around, finding a small packet and silver tube in a pocket on her left side. Blackbird, seeing her start to sit up, set the holadil aside, putting her good arm to help her.

"That what I think it is?" asked the retired knight suspiciously.

"Amphereon." Talons laid out a line of finely ground blue crystals and snorted it. A wave of energy hit her system, dismissing all the pain and focusing her.

"You're gonna pay a price when you come down. Do it much?"

"No."

"Think you oughta? You lost a lot of blood back there."

"No choice. Ladonys is going to die if I don't get there in time." Talons crawled out of the blind behind Blackbird.

Fifteen children, ranging in age from sixteen to maybe eight or nine years old stood a few yards off, regarding Talons with interest. Blackbird waved her hand at them, "My clan. We're going with you."

"That's not wise," Talons said. "We don't know what kind of assault they're mounting."

"We're up to it, aren't we, my brave ones?"

A chorus of "yes" went up from the children. Talons noticed then that every one of them was armed to the teeth with swords, daggers, slings and bows; and thinking back to the explosion in the defile, probably some things she had never encountered before.

Talons set off at a strong jog toward the hunting lodge Ladonys maintained near the Arris River. Blackbird and the children paced her easily, even the smallest.

\* \* \* \*

Wilstryn dismounted from her horse, a big shaggy brown beast. She moved with an easy elegance that tended to make people forget about the imperfections of her storkish looks. "Hello."

Laeoli nearly jumped out of her skin at the unexpected sound of Wilstryn's voice. The girl had her foot on the carcass of a slain deer preparing to retrieve her arrows. Ladonys had drawn a long hunting knife and just dropped to her knees to begin cleaning the beast.

Ladonys sheathed the knife.

"She's almost on her way."

"Then I don't have to run away," said Laeoli, relieved.



Wilstryn turned to the girl, "No. It is all the more urgent that you run away. Now. We must keep you alive until your ma'aram gets here. Margren, seeing Aejys coming, could decide to kill you now. I would if I were her."

"Give me your shirt, Laeoli," Ladonys said.

Laeoli obeyed.

"Steel yourself, child." She took Laeoli's arm and opened a shallow graze with her knife. The youth's arm bled freely. Then Wilstryn had Laeoli lay down. She dragged her, making a bloody trail, to a nearby stream.

As the trio walked back, Wilstryn extended the reins of her horse to Laeoli. "There are plenty of supplies to get you through. There is a small abandoned miners hut on the Doronar side of the south pass above Armaten. I'll meet you there."

Laeoli had her foot in the stirrup when a loud roaring came from the trees. The horse bolted, throwing Laeoli and dragging her several feet before she managed to get her sword out and slash the stirrup away. She gained her feet and turned, her blood running cold at the sight of four gigantic grizzlies charging them.

She reached for her bow before she thought: she had left it behind, lying on the ground beside the slain deer. Laeoli ran toward her 'lasah and Wilstryn, prepared to face death beside them.

Ladonys drew her sword and pulled her axe from her belt, letting them come to her while Wilstryn calmly aimed and shot, putting clothyard shaft after shaft into a single bear. The ha'taren's wynderjyn pawed the ground anxiously. Ladonys shook her head. "Too many."

Desperate need formed a wordless command in the core of Ladonys' being and raced down the deep intuitive bond between them: Run. Bring others.

The animal gave a shrill protest and headed for Castle Rowan.

Wilstryn put one through the bear's eye three yards off and it staggered to a weaving halt within easy reach of her. The assassin stepped back out of reach of its claws, looking for another target.

Laeoli tried to stay sword's length from the ripping claws, but the beast was too swift. She cut it twice in the forelegs before the claws tore her, opening her side from breast to hip. Even as she lost consciousness, falling into the water, she lodged her sword deep beneath the beast's breast.

The swift waters washed her away, face down, unmoving. Ladonys saw and cried out, faltering in her grief. The bear's claws caught her shoulders, laying her back open to the waist. Ladonys pivoted, cleaving the bear's skull with her axe. But even

as she and the bear fell together, the third was on her, tearing her face and limbs.

Wilstryn retreated as far as the water. She had a single arrow left and let it fly. It took the fourth bear, the one that had slain her godchild, in the shoulder. She drew her sword and dagger, standing firm and waiting to meet its attack. "Come and get me," she snarled. The beast's claws ripped her breasts and tore open her stomach as she drove her blade through its heart. Wilstryn staggered back, the bear falling at her feet as she fell dying across it.

\* \* \* \*

Talons broke from the forest cover onto a small hillcrest only to watch in horror as they fell. A grim, hard look came on her face as cold anger seized her. She drew her wounded arm out of the sling; even without drugs she was far past pain and feeling. She summoned her claws, starting down the hill with a long stride. Blackbird jogged after her, catching at her arm. Talons swung to face her in silence.

"This is a war," Blackbird said. "You never been in one, have you?"

Talons shook her head, remembering how hard she had pleaded with the Grand Master to let her fight. But he had kept her home, sending her out now and again for special, delicate, or complex killings and always on the far side of the Merezian continent from the war. She was Takhalme Gee's only surviving great grandchild from the Sharani ha'taren who had been his first and greatest love.

"Then I'm in charge. Not much of a fighter these days." Blackbird indicated her lifeless right arm. "But I'm a hell of a campaigner."

She signed the children, who instantly responded by forming a three-tiered skirmish line with the youngest ones in the rear and the oldest in the front. Then they started down the hill.

"Doesn't seem to be but one bear left. Lizard, get his attention."

The tall youth fitted an arrow to his bow, pausing and firing, then walking again. His first arrow caught it in the back. The bear rose onto its hind legs with a shattering roar of pain.

Talons snarled, breaking into a run before Blackbird could stop her. Blackbird signaled a lowering of the ranged weapons. "Lizard, Birdie, Jysy give her some back up. She's as stupid as some paladins I know."

Talons and the bear met at the base of the rise. Claws out, she danced around the beast, spinning out of the path of its claws, laying it open with her own. She moved like a dancer, finding her rhythm, strike and dance and strike again. Blackbird's eyes lit at the exquisite deadliness of the young assassin, signing the three older Urchins to hang back: they would only complicate the battle for Talons.

"She's not stupid," Blackbird amended, watching her systematically shred the bear to ribbons.

Talons bounded onto a low stone outcropping, sprang up in a high back flip that dropped her behind the bear. Before it could turn on her, she had taken its eyes and throat.

She kicked it as it staggered, weeping and falling. The noises were strangely human. The Urchins gathered around her, watching as the bear's form withered away, leaving a naked man in a golden collar bearing the dragon and rowans charm.

\* \* \* \*

Ladonys' six ha'taren retainers were the first to reach her. Blackbird rose from her fire, standing to meet them. Birdie, rinsing and replacing a cool cloth on Ladonys' brow, shot her ma'aram a questioning glance. Blackbird shook her head and the youth continued tending Ladonys. Talons and the rest had gone on, carrying Wilstryrn Hornbow to a safe house Blackbird had set up long years before. A child of the streets, Blackbird had gone back to them without missing a beat.

They rode at full gallop, pushing their wynderjyns to the limits, desperate with fear and worry. Ladonys' household, before she married Aejys, had always been small despite the fact that she came from an ancient and honored lineage; they were all fiercely loyal. The oldest, Soren, a gaunt, gray-haired woman who stopped counting her birthdays when she passed a hundred, sprang from her wynderjyn to kneel by Ladonys' side. "Mei Ajan," she cried, her voice catching as she brushed Birdie aside, cradling her tenderly. "Mei Ajan!"

Ladonys' eyes opened, she could not focus, and everything was blurred. "Shifter..." She groaned, breaking into a fit of coughing which brought up flecks of blood. "Laeoli... They got her..." Then she fainted.

Soren looked now to Blackbird. "What happened and what the hell are you doing here?"

"We were coming back from Toomei. Visiting my sister. Saw it all from the hillside," Blackbird nodded in that direction. Then the old campaigner thrust a brand into the fire. Blackbird led Soren from bear to bear, each wore that same charm, stopping finally at the shifter's body.

"The heir. Where is the heir?" Soren asked.

"Slain," Blackbird said bluntly, and then told her everything she had seen from the hill as they returned to Ladonys' side, leaving out Talons and Wilstryrn.

The youngest dropped to her knees beside them, her eyes filling with tears as she

handed the older woman a satchel of medicinals and a skin of water. "How bad is it?"

"I won't know until I've checked her wounds," she said, adding to Birdie, "You've done a good job of tending her." She turned to the others who now stood in a circle around them. "Yavran, we'll need a litter. All of you, listen to me, the heir is slain."

"Laeoli!" A sob broke from the youngest, Maranya's throat. They had been friends, not as close as Laeoli and Tamlestari, but very close. Soren pulled the youth into her arms, letting her sob against her shoulder.

"Blackbird, tell it again." the aged ha'taren said. And Blackbird did. When she had finished, the six retainers were grim, several with tears in their eyes, but no other sign of grief.

"You three," Soren jabbed a finger at each, "See if you can find any thing that might let Sonden's people read what happened here." She started briskly to work cleaning and bandaging the wounds.

The three started searching instantly, their faces grim.

One ha'taren followed the bloody trail to the water's edge and shouted for the others. Soren left Maranya to help Yavran get Ladonys onto the litter. Blackbird trailed after her. "I'd appreciate it if you could forget I was here. I don't want to bring these folk down on my children ... you know..."

Soren nodded absently as she joined the others at the stream. "Consider it done, Blackbird."

Blackbird gestured to Birdie and they put out their torches, disappearing into the night.

Soren knelt, touching the dried blood and crushed grass.

"They probably walked in the water to lose the trail," Soren stated. "There are not enough of us to split up and track them."

"I want to try," a young ha'taren, Arvath, said, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

Soren looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, "Don't play hero, Arvath. If you find them, come back and tell us. The Mar'ajan can send a larger force of arms than we can muster."

Arvath nodded, "I'll be careful."

"Don't do anything stupid either," Soren sounded almost cross.

"By my life and honor," Arvath replied. Then she whistled her wynderjyn to her and set off alone along the river, searching for the place where the shifters had left the water.

Soren pulled Ladonys' axe from the base of the bear's head. As she did, she noticed the charm on its leather thong. She looked at it and her face flushed with anger. "Margren!" she snarled, spitting on the bear. "Margren stinks of evil. Kaethreyn cannot or will not smell it." Soren slid the charm into her pants pocket.

When they had the litter ready, they suspended it between two wynderjyns. Soren walked beside Ladonys, praying she would wake again; wondering how to break the news to Kaethreyn that her only grandchild was dead. Yavran walked beside the lead wynderjyn. The five moved in slow sad procession back to the castle.

\* \* \* \*

The Mar'ajan Kaethreyn watched them come from the battlements above the city gates. She wore a simple dark green shirt and pants, legs stuffed into tall deerskin boots with high, horsemyn's heels. Her long black hair hung loose, held in place by a simple golden circlet. The heavy braided chain of her office with the Rowanslea crest cut into the face of a large ruby set in gold hung beside the silver Aroanan Rune of a consecrated ha'taren. When they drew near, she descended.

A crowd had grown to immense proportions at the gates to the City of Rowan after word had spread about Ladonys' wynderjyn returning alone and wounded. Many had seen the animal pass and recognized the crest on the saddle. Word spread through the city swiftly; more than half the citizenry knew about it before Kaethreyn and were already gathered when she first came to the gates. They gave way as she approached with a handful of her elite guard.

A tall mon in long black robes trimmed in silver runes arrived. He walked with a silver crozier in his left hand adorned with the Aroanan Rune. His beardless face, delicately boned, with large black eyes and a wide thick-lipped mouth, held both serenity and compassion. His long black hair hung to his knees, caught in three places by silver clips. Six warrior priests flanked him wearing black breeches, boots, and tunics.

When the crowd saw him, they started dropping to their knees with murmurs of "Your Holiness."

Ordinarily High Priest Sonden would have acknowledged their homage and blessed them. This time he moved with a gliding step past them. He reached Ladonys before Kaethreyn, kneeling beside the litter. Sonden handed his staff to a priest who stepped forward to receive it. He placed one hand on Ladonys' forehead and gripped her wrist with the other. Sonden's eyes closed. His mouth tightened as his awareness extended itself through Ladonys' body, Reading her wounds.

"Take her to my manor house, it's closest," he said. Two priests took the litter loose and began to walk away with Ladonys.

"Your Holiness," Kaethreyn began.

"Your Grace, she is better off in my care. Infection already spreads through her blood."

"Laeoli..." The Marajan's voice caught strangely. "She was with her."

"The young heir!"

"Forgive me, Mei ajan," Soren dropped to one knee before them. "Ladonys' regained consciousness long enough to say she was slain. She fell into the water ... her body was swept away..." She pulled a tuft of bloody grass from her pouch, extending it to Sonden. "Your Holiness."

He closed his hand around the grass, sensing the pattern of the blood on it. "It is Laeoli's." His eyes lifted to Kaethreyn's. "I am so very sorry..."

Kaethreyn went deathly pale, her mouth narrowing until her lips disappeared. She walked beside the litter; Sonden led them through the streets to his house in Rowan.

Kaethreyn turned aside there, "You will let me know..."

"Of course, Your Grace," Sonden said with gentle politeness.

Soren approached him, "By your leave, Your Holiness," she said, "we would like to attend our liege." She is all we have left.

Sonden gave her a look of such compassion it brought tears to the old ha'taren's eyes. "Of course. You are all welcome in my home."

\* \* \* \*

Soren set a watch in Ladonys' room. They occupied a chair beside the window, out of the way of the priests working on their liege's wounds. One of the five remained with her at all hours. If Sonden thought anything about this he did not mention it until the next morning as Soren was taking breakfast in the kitchen. The five ha'taren chose not to eat with the priests, although they had been invited to the table: they wanted to make their presence as unobtrusive as possible.

Soren rose from her seat at a table in the far corner as Sonden approached her. "Your Holiness." She bowed her head briefly in acknowledgement.

"None of that," he said gently smiling, "I have as little formality in my home as I can get by with. I get enough of it at the temples."

"Ladonys?"

"Resting comfortably. But there is something we need to speak of. Bring your food and drink and follow me."

She followed the High Priest up two flights of stairs to a little garret room with two large windows. Soft, deep carpets woven in bright geometric patterns covered the floor. The curtains were pale, almost transparent white linen, letting the sun fill the room with warmth. In a small alcove stood a statue of the God, Aroana, kneeling with her arms around two children. A white votive candle burned on a private altar before it. Bookcases lined the walls. The furniture sat in the middle; a gold couch with deep cushions, bright pillows propped in the corners; two claw-footed chairs with generous cushions; and a small table with an inkwell and some papers spread over it.

Soren's ha'taren sensitivity to magic told her the room was shielded.

"Please, sit," Sonden said, waving his hand at the couch. Soren did so. Then he pulled a chair close and sat down. He leaned forward as he spoke. "There is more to this than you have told me. Your people are standing guard because they believe Ladonys threatened by more than her wounds. Am I right?"

Soren drew a deep, ragged breath, reached into her pocket, and handed the golden charm to Sonden.

A shadow passed over his face as he studied the charm. "This is what I feared." He laid the charm on the table, laced his fingers, and pressed them to his mouth for a long silent moment. "When the lifemages in Armaten disappeared I sent word to the main Guild hall in Charas, asking if they had been recalled. They replied that no one knew what had become of them. Two weeks ago all their guild houses in Shaurone were closed and the mages summoned home. No one could offer an explanation. I see my explanation here. Where did you find it?"

"Sire Sonden," Soren said, unable to completely dispense with formality, "I found it around the neck of a dead shifter, killed by Ladonys."

"Do you suspect who made this thing? Who would want to harm Ladonys and Laeoli?"

Soren was silent, her expression uneasy.

"What you say will not leave this room."

Soren shook her old head regretfully, speaking as if the words were being pulled from her mouth, "Margrenan brye Rowan."

"Yes, that one's aura is quite black."

Soren looked amazed. "You see auras?"

Sonden smiled at that, "I have more gifts than I allow to be known." He picked up the charm. "May I keep this?"

"Of course, Sire Sonden," Soren said.

"Good. Now you may finish your breakfast here or in the kitchen or wherever you like. But I have many things to attend to."

\* \* \* \*

WindHawk,

I regret to inform you that a pack of bears, possibly led by a 'shifter attacked Ladonys and Laeoli as they hunted alone two days ago. One of those charms such as John Dawn gave the Grand Master was found around the neck of a slain bear. Ladonys has not yet regained full consciousness and is badly mauled. Laeoli is missing. My people are looking for her.

Archer

Aejys shook with rage and shock as she read the letter. "Tag, get our forces ready to march in the morning."

"But Aejys..."

"Now!"

Tagalong sighed, departing immediately.

Hanadi sat quietly in a corner, her hand on Brundarad's head. "Only if you had traveled with a handful could you have left any sooner, Aejustrys Rowan. And that would have played into Margrenan's hands. You must move with caution and power."

Aejys did not reply to her statement. She stared out the window, "It looks as if I may already have nothing left to lose."

"You still have your life and that is always something. What is more it may be that Laeoli has escaped."

"I don't know that, Hanadi. I would appreciate it if you asked Cassana and Tamlestari to come up. I'd like to speak with them alone."



"So be it." Hanadi rose with a deep bow and left with Brundarad at her heels.

\* \* \* \*

Sonden's healer priests, while not lifemages, were still quite skilled. A week after the attack by the shifters, Soren was delighted to find Ladonys sitting up in bed, speaking with quiet stoicism of the attack and the death of Laeoli.

Maranya gave up her chair beside Ladonys' bed to Soren. The old ha'taren sat down and took Ladonys' hand, clasping it in both of her and then kissing it. "Mei Ajan," she said, "it is good to see you up."

Just then Yavran burst into the room, "Soren!" Then she saw Ladonys sitting up, "Mei Ajan. Arvath is dead."

"Damn it! I told her to take no chances!" Soren cursed angrily, masking her sorrow.

Ladonys paled. "How?"

"Two hunters found her and her wynderjyn. They'd..." Yavran choked on her words, halted and started again. "They brought her body back. Someone – something had nailed her to a tree and disemboweled her."

Silence fell in the room: It must have taken at least a day or more for her to die in unimaginable pain.

Yavran mastered herself, beginning again. "They laid her wynderjyn's head at her feet. The monsters must have made her watch them kill him."

"Soren, please tell his holiness I wish to speak with him." Ladonys looked deeply shaken, but in control.

Soren nodded and left.

"What are you going to do?" Maranya asked.

"I'm going to ask for sanctuary. For all of us."

\* \* \* \*

"I don't understand any of this!" Kaethreyn paced angrily back and forth in her study. "Ladonys is perfectly safe here. This is her home!"

"Apparently she feels the source of attack came from within your household," Sonden said, imperturbably. "Arvath's murder, and I would not call it anything less, adds weight to her claims."

"I have lost my only grandchild. My rangers and scouts can find no trail, no sign that leads anywhere. My eldest daughter abandons me. My son-in-law is slain and now my daughter-in-law is frightened of my court?"

"A member of your family is in league with Waejontor," Sonden replied, tapping the charm. "I would like to have your entire household read for the taint of Waejontor. Especially Margren and all of her cousins."

"That's out of the question!" Kaethreyn snapped. "There is no treason in my household! I will not tolerate the humiliation of a mass reading. Clearly that charm was wrought to mislead us."

"I wish I could believe that, my old friend, but I cannot."

"Then we have nothing more to speak of!" Kaethreyn stalked out of the room.

Sonden sighed deeply, pocketing the charm. His heart felt heavy and a weight lay on his shoulders such as he had not felt since the war's end. There had to be some way to make Kaethreyn see reason though he could not think of any just then. Sonden rose and departed Castle Rowan. He had many last minute details to attend to before he returned to Armaten on the morrow. Ladonys would ride in a carriage he had hired to lessen the pain of her wounds while they traveled.

\* \* \* \*

Margren rose as the assembled nobility took their dinner, taking a very subdued Juldrid by the hand bringing her to her feet. "I have an announcement to make!"

All eyes turned to Margren and Juldrid. "My beloved ma'aram, ajans, and consorts, my friends all. This is a sad time. Just days ago my beloved niece, the heir, was slain by a ravening beast sent by powers out of hell. Yet there is also joy. We are with child."

## CHAPTER SEVEN. THE ROAD TO SAINT TARMUS

The morning was as chill as the afternoons were hot. The night mists, smelling of salt and pine, still lay heavily upon the broad green beyond the walls of Vorgensburg where Aejs' company assembled in a long column three myn wide. The citizenry of Vorgensburg filled all the open spaces around them, leaving only the far end of the road open where the city guard held them back. They stood in little patches of family and social classes, here a group of brightly clad syndics and their equally attired wives and children; there a poor mother in patched clothing holding her child up on her shoulder to see; carpenters in leather aprons; clusters of sailors; and the blacksmith standing spread-legged, broad as a tree. Becca and Clemmerick stood close to Aejs flanked by those members of the household that were being left behind. Josh was not among them. He had vanished in the night to one of his

hidey-holes that only Clemmerick knew of.

The tavern master did not even attempt to smile, but wore her misgivings on her face in grim silence. Clemmerick, standing at her elbow, leaned on his huge staff and nodded to his companions fortunate (or not as the case might prove) enough to be included on this riding. "You be careful, Aejys," he admonished her.

The lapsed paladin, her hand on the saddle preparing to mount, turned back and clasped his huge hand in both of hers. "I have not lived this long by doing otherwise, my friend."

Despite Aejys' objections, her three lieutenants, Tagalong, Hanadi, and Johannes, had marked their fighting units as separate from the others. Tagalong's Vorgeni wore black ribbons pinned to their shoulders in consideration of Brendorn's death; Johannes' people wore red ribbons as close to the color of his beard as they could find; Hanadi's guildsmyn wore green for reasons known to Hanadi alone knew. Only the hostlers, the drivers, and minor servants such as Eliahu did not wear Aejys' livery.

The mage had put aside his drab pilgrim's robes for a pair of dark brown leather breeches and vest over a blue wool shirt with the cuffs rolled up half way to his elbows. A heavy wool cloak kept back the morning chill. He looked like a simple workingman save that his hands were soft and delicate. His eyes had a distant, thoughtful look. He had learned much about Aejys since the day of the duel. He knew the reputation of the Lion of Rowanslea, even from his realm in the farthest north. He had begun his pilgrimage more out of curiosity about the other realms than for religious reasons. Most of his life had been spent in study and contemplation and the rest in the day-to-day task of watching over his chill realm, caring for his people. There had been many small adventures along the way as he journeyed south, but nothing of great importance or serious challenge. Those who thought to bother him, ruffians, rogues, and the goblin tribes learned quickly to avoid the slender small man who wielded the ancient staff CallThunder. He was a man of subtle feelings and gentle passions, now gripped by an eagerness and expectation unfamiliar to him. Eliahu had seen signs of dark magics brewing in the lands of the goblins to the north east of the Kwaklahmyn lands and could not help wondering, knowing the reputation of the Lion of Rowanslea, but what this expedition might in some way be linked to them. To pit his power against such things would be truly a magnificent task and worthy of the newest High Mage of Winter. A sense of déjà vu brushed through him as if he walked in his ancestor's footsteps into legend with this journey. A small smile at once impish and irreverent touched his lips and rested there.

Lancers rode at the head of the van, followed by units of mounted swordsmyn and archers all clad in steel corselets and hauberks with sky blue surcoats bearing Aejys' device of rowan trees within the ouroboros. The wagons came next and more mounted swordsmyn brought up the rear.

Aejys, Tagalong Smith, and Cassana Odaren led. The three Sharani went clad in steel hauberks. Cassana and Tamlestari wore white surcoats with a device of the crimson rose framed by swords crossed at the hilts and overlapping the stem, which marked them as members of the Yarrendari Mar'ajante of Shaurone. Aejys' sky blue surcoat bore her rowans trees and ouroborus, the black armband with the lock of Brendorn's hair banded her left arm and the gray scarf of penitence her right.

Hanadi rode just behind Aejys flanked by Tamlestari and Johannes. She still dressed in the long side-slit coat and loose-legged trousers of her folk, but now the coat was of black leather and the trousers of heavy cotton. A wide bladed tulwar hung at her hip and the sheath for the knife at her opposite side. A sharply pointed steel cap crowned her with a scarf wrapped around its base, the bottom, and ends wrapping her throat so that not a strand of her dark hair showed. Brundarad walked beside her horse, drawing the awed stares and frightened whispers of the gathering crowds. The Euzadi nomad had taken charge of the scouts, the best of whom was the huge shadow hound.

Eliahu rode the lead wagon beside a Kwaklahmyn driver. He pulled his gray cloak around him against the chill and hugged his slender staff, his head lowered and thoughtful. The driver, seeing the line begin to move out snapped the reins. The horses threw their shoulders into the harness and pulled. The wagon moved.

Young people threw flowers. The entire crowd shouted and called, wishing them a safe journey and a quick return. Aejys Rowan had been good to Vorgensburg and Vorgensburg wanted to be good to Aejys. The crowds trailed after them, thinning slowly out and falling away as the company took the old north road and vanished into the shadows of the dense spruce forest.

Aejys' wounds ached in the cold despite her clothing and the soft leather jerkin beneath her mail. She thought of her warm parlor and the pleasant company of her people at the Cock and Boar. By the end of the day her regulars would be back in the common room taking their supper and a tankard. They would probably be discussing the day's events and her leaving. She could hear their voices in her memory; feel the warmth of companionship she had enjoyed for nearly five years. She had enjoyed owning the tavern, building the inn beside it. It was the most pleasant her life had been since long before the Great War. She already missed it. All the little rumors about her origin had been quelled by the Odarens' arrival and the revelation that she had indeed been the Lion of Rowanslea. They would probably still be talking about it when she returned. If she returned.

She knew that Margren had prepared many nasty surprises for her journey, otherwise the God would not have advised her to take a force of arms along. Aejys wondered what effect she could ultimately have when she reached her childhood home. She could take no direct action. Oh, she could argue and demand, reason and persuade, but she could not take direct action herself to regain her daughter. Her vow bound her. And her ma'aram could be a stubborn woman. There had to be

some solution that she had not thought of yet. Her liege-god would not send her on a fool's errand. A tremor of trepidation ran through her: What could she really do?

Aejys shook free of the feeling. She took out her pipe, filled, and lit it. She nudged Gwyndar with her knees and the big wynderjyn moved out. Her people rode beside and around and behind her. The journey was begun.

She had no choice, really. She loved her child, her only child, and she had promised Brendorn. If there was atonement in this for having abandoned her child, her family, and her people in Rowanslea, then at least she would have that, but it was small comfort. And her vow formed a rock in her stomach, for she felt certain there would be no way to keep it and her life would be forfeit. She did not fear death, nor did she go looking for it. She feared a useless death, one that accomplished nothing ... to throw away her life for the good of nothing and no one. Aejys thought again of her little tavern and longed to be back there. Her life had had purpose and pleasure and now that was all gone.

\* \* \* \*

At midday Hanadi's guildsmyn scouts broke from the others and rode ahead to spy out the paths. The company moved at a moderate pace dictated by the wagons. Gwyndar, sensitive to the slightest touch of her knee, moved steadily without need of reins so that Aejys could take out her pipe and smoke in the saddle. They took the west fork late in the day and made camp at twilight.

\* \* \* \*

The company turned north again at the end of the second day. They crossed the tussocked hills that were little more than piled up masses of tumbled, broken rocks, boulders, and outcroppings with a thin layer of soil scattered over. Tall spiky grasses with purple plumes clung to every patch of exposed earth. The six wagons struggled with shepherd's paths that were almost too narrow and the root-shattered remnants of abandoned roads that once carried trade from the coast across the great marshy basins of Cherdon'datar into the mountains of Vallimrah and eventually into Shaurone itself. Eliahu's wagon got a wheel caught between a boulder and a rock.

Jeord, a huge mercenary, rode up and dismounted. Jeord's bushy blond hair was caught at his neck in a long bristling tail. Two inches of matching square-cut beard framed his face like coarse yellow wire. His bright blue eyes gleamed with a reckless intensity as he took a spread legged stance, seized the spokes in his hands and lifted the wagon, shoving it clear. Eliahu shook his head in wonderment at the display of strength. Jeord curled his lip in a sneer as he nodded to the cook, then mounted and kicked his horse into a gallop to resume his place in the vanguard.

The riders ranged out now around the wagons as they found their own paths down the steep, rugged hills. They descended into a rock-strewn valley. The stretches of green were broader, but the rocks could easily have held ambushers and worse.

Hanadi and Brundarad took the point.

As the shadows of afternoon lengthened toward evening, one of Hanadi's scouts, a small dark woman, darker than the Sharani, rode up signing Aejs to follow. Aejs pressed Gwyndar into a gallop, waving Cassana and Tamlestari to accompany her. They rode across the valley until they came in sight of Hanadi. The Euzadi knelt checking something on the ground. Aejs' heels thudded lightly against Gwyndar's sides to get his attention.

"Let's see what she's got, boy," Gwyndar turned without breaking stride. "What is it?" The lapsed paladin asked, springing from the wynderjyn destrier. She pulled off her gloves, tucking them in her belt as she walked.

"Manticore spoor," Hanadi said, nodding at the remains of a half eaten great horned mountain goat. Beside it were large cat prints easily sixteen inches across. "If luck is with us, we should be well across this valley and out of the open before this creature comes seeking another meal. They are almost as fond of mynflesh as they are of horse. I do not wish to lose either."

"Nor do I," Aejs agreed, running her finger around the rim of the print. "I'd say it's about half a day old."

"As do I, Aejs'trys Rowan. And the creature will be hungry again come nightfall."

"We'll not camp until we reach the mountain's shadows."

"Huh!" Hanadi nodded. "And Brundarad, he will be back by then with more news."

Aejs kept them moving until well past dark when they sheltered in a hollow thick with spruce. There a small stream spread like a white veil through a succession of tiny rapids and pooled against the rock face.

Aejs walked through the camp as the myn bedded down their horses beside their tents and Tagalong supervised getting Aejs' modest tent up. She spoke to each of the myn, getting to know them, learning their names. A line formed at the cook wagon where Eliahu dipped up stew and filled flagons with ale.

"Just one flagon each, Eli, remember," she told him as he filled her dish. "The water from that stream is pure and good. And," she added, letting her voice carry, "I'll be drinking that when I finish this."

He nodded, smiling politely. "Of course." The Winter Mage noted that she did not have to take her meal like the common soldier, she could have sent Hanadi or Tamlestari, who acted as her orderlies when they made camp, to fetch her meals; most leaders would have. Aejs truly had the common touch. She established herself as merely the equal of the myn and then dared them to match her courage and audacity.

She carried her stew and flagon to the central fire where the sweet tones of a woman's voice rose accompanied by the delicate notes of a skillfully played lute. The soldiers were seated on the ground, listening while they ate. A slender guildsmyn played the lute with nimble fingers while a woman sang. The singer, a tiny, chocolate skinned person, glistening black hair a mass of dense shoulder-length ringlets, looked scarcely large enough to lift the sword she wore at her shoulder, much less wield it. She sang Oak of Sorrows about two young lovers who became separated during the War of Three Queens.

"Do not be fooled by her size," Hanadi whispered softly at Aejs' ear. "She is Jaqui of Treth. You have heard the name, I am certain."

"Indeed," Aejs replied just a tad surprised, for Jaqui of Treth had ranged the northlands beside the Thunder God's daughter in the years preceding the Great War and gained a mighty reputation. "I thought she no longer rode these lands."

Hanadi glowed with smug satisfaction. "She does not. She stalks her homelands and the continent of Jedrua. I have her on loan from a southern chieftain."

"I never dreamed she was one of yours," Aejs replied, astounded.

"She is not actually. She is the ally of a friend and it cost me two favors to get her."

"I am honored. I thought only I remained of..."

"Hmnp! Do not flatter yourself that you are the last. Several heroes still live, Aejs' Rowan," Hanadi's voice turned haughty. "And I have collected a few of them for this sortie."

"I owe you, Hanadi," Aejs said, resisting the urge to ask which others rode under her colors. Aejs did not like to question too closely or press for information any sooner than she had to since that generally put people on their guard: Hanadi would make things known when the time was right so long as Aejs minded her own business. Aejs usually knew when to push and when not to. Nonetheless, she would have Tagalong and some of her people discretely circulate and gather the names of every one in Hanadi's company. Tagalong, Aejs felt certain, already knew most of them anyway. She rose and started for the stream.

"Yes, you do," Hanadi responded softly, adding to herself as Aejs walked out of earshot, "And I will take my pay in favors when the time has come."

\* \* \* \*

The streambed was thick with tules where it pooled among a small knot of willows. The cry of a red-tailed hawk broke the stillness and Aejs could almost feel the birds and small animals shivering in their hiding places. That hawk's long tail enabled it to

turn at a twig and flash in a different direction with incredible swiftness. And it was beloved of Willodarus, the God of the Woodlands. She wondered if its cry was an omen as she knelt amid the rushes, setting her bowl and flagon down.

Where had it all gone wrong? When did Margren start hating her? She remembered coming home from school at harvest break and struggling to hold the chubby child on her knee. A seven year old not quite big enough to comfortably take the three year old on her lap. Margren had been precocious, remembering the ballads and texts to the smallest word and trying to write her own before she was eight. She had a gift for things Aejs did not even attempt. Aejs remembered listening to Margren's poems and songs while they sat with their ma'arams before the hearth in Kaethreyn's study. Margren had such a sweet voice. Margren joined Aejs at school and the older child had always made it a point to intervene if the older children of the nobility picked on her for as a younger child she was heir to nothing. The priests and teachers insisted on treating them all equally at the school, not allowing any deferment based on birth or rank. Aejs knew that sometimes that meant a sensitive child like Margren got the bad end of the stick. So Aejs had checked on her and kept track of her. Aejs always tried to be her champion. Then one day Margren came to her rooms and screamed at her, told her that she could take care of herself and to stop getting in her way. Aejs had been thunderstruck. She could not even think how to respond. A few days later Margren went home ill. Margren never came back to school. Kaethreyn arranged for an armsmaster and tutors to attend Margren at home. Aejs rarely saw her sister after that except for vacations or when they both chanced to be serving at the Saer'ajan's court. She would see Margren talking to people they both knew and when Aejs tried to join in Margren would leave, sometimes in tears, or simply go silent and glaring. It made Aejs ache. Aejs had always tried to be straight forward, believing that if they could just talk about what was bothering Margren they could set things right between them. But Margren rebuffed her or launched into a litany of how cruel Aejs was, how little she really cared about Margren and their family. And Aejs finally gave up and got on with her life. Where had it all gone wrong? Aejs had tried asking people close to Margren. But their answers never made any sense, or they refused to talk about Margren at all saying they could not take sides. But Aejs had not been asking them to take sides; she had been asking them to explain, to help her make things better. Now Margren had become her deadliest, most implacable enemy and Aejs still did not understand where it had all gone wrong.

A tall, large form detached itself from the shadows as Aejs rinsed her bowl out and filled her flagon with the sweet cool waters.

"I never dreamed you would bring so many females," said Johannes, moonlight gilding his beard with silver as he squatted beside her.

Aejs could smell the rancid sweat on him so different from the sweet scents that adorned Sharani and sylvan males. She disliked having him so near. The lapsed paladin moved to a drier spot among the trees to sit. "You didn't?" she questioned,



not bothering to school the skepticism from her voice, "You knew I'm Sharani. That we go to a Mar'ajante of Shaurone and you did not imagine that I would bring large numbers of women?"

"And you knew there were no females in my ranks," Johannes responded, rising to his feet. "The women of the coast are not warriors. They know their place in the world."

"Are you suggesting that it's a problem?" Aejs set her tankard and bowl aside, taking out her pipe. She filled and lit it. She realized that she was beginning to dislike Johannes already and to credit some of the baser tales about him.

"That's a pretty piece singing back there and some of my soldiers had thoughts."

Aejys pulled her pipe from her lips and smiled thinly. "They would be dead if they tried."

"By you?"

"By her. That, if you didn't know, is Jaqui of Treth."

"Ahhh, yes," Johannes replied, pulling at his beard thoughtfully. "My fellows would come off with the short end of that stick ... but not all..."

"Johannes, I don't know what your game is, or why two days out you want to start it now, but let me assure you, all of the women in my household are professionals. Most of them equal to Jaqui. If you want their names, go ask them."

Johannes frowned as he thought for a moment on that, and then started to back off. "I will caution them."

"Oh, and Johannes, several of them are ha'taren. You want to go figure out which, be my guest. Look closely at every dark skinned woman and ask yourself if they might be Sharani. Because if they are, they're ha'taren as in Ha'taren Guard." So far as Aejs knew there were only three Sharani in the whole camp, but it would do him good to wonder.

"But the little thing with the blond roots..."

Aejys erupted in hardy laughter. "You are speaking of the daughter of the Breesya. That's Tamlestari Odaren Desharen."

Johannes' mouth dropped open and his eyes widened. "It's a company of Blinkin' Heroes!"

Aejys' laughter grew louder at Johannes' discomfiture and carried back to the camp. "You could say that. Yes, I think you could."

He turned again to leave and Aeijys halted him with a word. "One more point, my friend, if any man of your unit offers the slightest harm or rudeness to women of the other units, he'll likely find the whole damn unit coming down on him. You understand? Comrades in arms do not make gender judgments."

"Better than you know," Johannes replied.

\* \* \* \*

Aeijys grew thoughtful and quiet after Johannes had departed. Fully half of Hanadi's elite forces were women. Nearly all of Aeijys' household drawn from the people of Vorgensburg was male. Tagalong's six thieves were women.

That boiled down to roughly two-thirds male. Johannes probably wanted to dump the females in order to make Aeijys more dependent on his units. Or she could have misjudged and would end up with a gender war, or close to it, on her hands; which was something the Sharani High Ma'arams had predicted for generations. Then she heard a sighing in the wind as of a soft voice calling. Or was it in her head? Aeijys could not be certain. It had been too many years...

Dragons' fodder. Chaff and wheat divide. Noble will rise to the surface.

Aeijys drew her rune sword and drove the point deep into the earth where the moonlight could touch it. She knelt to pray before her God's sacred rune.

At first the words came easily, gradually bringing a peace into her heart and a simple clarity that said when the time came, whatever came, she would be able to deal with it. But when she tried to move beyond the simple prayers of her childhood, her stomach tightened painfully, every muscle in her body seemed to crawl beneath her skin. She smelled the fires of Bucharsa temple, felt the iron grip of the stone trolls on her body. A scream rose in her throat.

Strong young arms slid around her and she heard Tamlestari's voice, soothing and comforting. The young ha'taren held her as she wept, then kissed away the memories that seven long years had done nothing to blunt. Their mouths met, tentatively at first, then deeply, their tongues twining hungrily. Aeijys' hands felt Tamlestari's firm young breasts, caressing them, feeling the nipples hardening beneath her touch.

"Well, well, what have we here? A lover's tryst?" A deep male voice broke upon them.

They stiffened, pulling away from each other. "Go on," Aeijys whispered. "I'll catch up with you."

Reluctantly, Tamlestari stood, vanishing into the night.

Aejys' side twinged as she stood, yanking her sword from the earth and shoving it into the sheath. She did not know whether he had lingered or returned, but it did not matter, the moment was ruined. Her face burned with anger. "Johannes, get the hell out of here!"

Johannes sneered. "As you wish." He started to leave, pausing, to toss one more taunt at her, "But what would my myn have said to see you so when they are denied such pleasures." He was gone before she could reply.

She became aware of an aching soreness in her still healing shield arm; the pain and discomfort had probably been there all along, she guessed, but the distractions of the day had blunted her notice until then. Two slender forms stepped from the shadowed trees. Aejys' hand dropped to her sword hilt, but she made no move to draw it.

Cassana and Tamlestari emerged into the moonlight. The blond was lengthening in her hair and the black ends hung like tips of a bizarre but intriguing crest. She walked lightly, scarcely moving the grass and tulles, like her ma'aram's people: the Valdren. Tamlestari reminded Aejys of Brendorn in the ways that members of one race all seem very similar to one another in the eyes of someone of another race who has not lived among them for any time. Aejys could still taste her young mouth, longing for the feel of Tamlestari's breasts, her sweet body wrapped in her arms. Yet she was very different from Brendorn, Aejys reminded herself, feeling the twinges of sadness swirl up, she drew a deep breath, exhaling slowly to master herself.

"How long have you been there?"

"Little thing with the blond roots, my ass!" Tamlestari mimicked savagely, then grinned, "Needs a hot poker up the toot if you ask me!"

"Where's a bi-kyndi when you need one?" Aejys laughed.

"I know one," Tamlestari said seriously. "In fact I know several."

"I was joking," Aejys told her, slipping an arm around Tamlestari in a companionable hug. The lapsed paladin could feel the warmth of her hard young body, smell the sweet muskiness of her skin. It would be so easy to love that one, Aejys thought, as desire warmed her heart and spread through her veins. She realized that Tamlestari was smiling up at her with a look that Aejys feared to interpret. The youth was just two years older than Aejys' daughter, Laeoli, while Aejys was the Lion of Rowanslea with a reputation that had spread far beyond the boundaries of her homeland; Tamlestari's attraction to her might be nothing more than the sweet vulnerability of hero worship. Aejys knew she had no right to take advantage of the youth – and yet she had allowed herself to be almost drawn into making love to her. What did she feel about the young ha'taren? Was it just the wounded loneliness of Brendorn's death that made her want to hold and touch and love Tamlestari? Or was it something else? Something she had no right to feel?

The older woman released the youth and stepped away. "Come on, I want to pull my boots off. And," Aejs' voice dropped very low, "just between us I have a bottle of a sweet red Tovantei vintage crying to be opened."

They walked silently through the camp settling down for the night around them. Horses were picketed beside the tents of their riders. Hostlers moved among the tents tending the animals. Aejs had complicated their task by not allowing them to keep the horses together at night, but the lapsed paladin was taking no chances on her people being surprised and separated from their mounts. She built the core of her defense around the lancers, which made their mounts doubly precious.

The central fire still burned. Fire would attract some kinds of evil and discourage others: as a rule manticores disliked fire. Beside it, Tagalong laughed and rolled the bones. Two soldiers, the last by the fire besides the sentry, cursed. Aejs turned aside and stood over them as yet unnoticed.

"You must let them win once in awhile, Tag," she said.

Tagalong Smith looked up with a wry grin. "But, Aejs."

"Give them back their money," Aejs said in a quietly stubborn voice.

The men watched her with undisguised interest.

"Ah, but Aejs, ya can't mean it! I won it fair."

"Give them back their money," Aejs repeated, her tone going stern.

One of the myn sniggered and the other elbowed him. The sentry paused to watch.

The line of Aejs' mouth hardened and stillness came over her like the earth in moments before a storm. "You're Johannes' myn, are you not?"

The pair hastily stood up, brushing their tunics off and coming to attention. "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

They looked at each other for a moment, obviously flustered. "Yes, Mistress."

"I thought Johannes at least instructed you on how to address a Sharani of my rank."

Their fluster turned to discomfort. "Master? Lord?"

"Better. Those are titles of power in your lands. The power here is mine. Johannes works for me. Therefore you work for me. I'll tolerate no disrespect. Of me or my

lieutenants. Understood?"

The two mercenaries nodded. "Yes, Lord Aejs," they said together.

"Make certain your comrades understand also, because I'll skin the next man alive." Then she turned to Tagalong, "Give them back their money."

Tagalong pulled her winnings out of her pockets and made a small pile on the ground.

"If you don't want to lose, don't play with her," Aejs further admonished them. "Her luck is legendary in my lands. Dynanna, God of Cussedness, blessed her with it. Now, come on, Tag. We've got other things to take care of before we sleep."

The camp cot that Aejs slept on was larger and better made than those of her soldiers, but it was still just a cot with a blanket and a favorite heavy quilt thrown over it. She did not believe in the kind of aristocratic nonsense that led other commanders and nobles during the war to bring along their heavy beds, dozens of servants and attendants with strings of sutlers and camp followers bringing up the rear. A long cedar chest made a night stand at the head of the cot. Two leather campstools stood opposite the cot. Tagalong settled on the ground, one knee drawn up, and her right arm draped over. Tamlestari moved her stool as close to Aejs as possible. Aejs opened the chest, taking out four ceramic cobalt blue cups decorated with bits of shell followed by a bottle of blood red wine.

She passed around the cups of wine, then pulled off her boots and settled cross-legged on the cot. "Ah! That's much better." Aejs massaged her toes. "I'd forgotten what it felt like to spend a long day with my feet in heavy boots. I don't do that very often anymore."

"Ya used ta sleep in 'em," Tagalong pointed out between pulls from her cup.

"I probably will again once Margren starts throwing stuff at us."

"You really think Margren's going to hit us?" Tamlestari asked.

"Yes," Aejs said. "You saw the letter. She must have substantial forces out here of some kind. And I'll wager they're not Sharani or I would have heard by now."

"Native's my guess. Margren was always trouble," Tagalong growled shifting into flawless Sharani, "I remember she tried to knife you for saving her from that unicorn stud the summer she turned twelve."

Surprise showed on every face, all the cross talk died. Aejs realized that they were all staring at her expectantly. She felt naked and exposed. Tagalong, who had always been so careful with her secrets, now seemed determined that all of them concerning Margren be dumped in public view. "Tag, that's enough!"

"I have never heard that one," Cassana said.

"Tag and Kaethreyn, my ma'aram, are the only ones who know." Aeijys swirled the wine in her cup, downed it in one quaff. "Kaethreyn called me a liar." She felt as if rocks were gathering in her stomach. She did not fear war and death. But the feelings and memories seemed ready to swallow her whole if she let them out: that loss of control terrified her more than anything else in her life. "I have always believed," Aeijys formed her words with slow care, "that speaking ill of Margren was somehow breaking my vow."

"Lying would be. Even perhaps relating tales of her misbehavior to someone who might be influenced by your words," Cassana said, "but the truth to someone who already opposes her, I think not. You are not doing her a damage by telling us things we already suspect."

"I have never been one to speak of the things that trouble me. This is not easy."

"Then maybe it is time you told someone else and started now," Cassana said gently insistent. "We are putting our lives, our honor and our fortunes on the line. We have a right to know."

Aeijys almost disagreed, but Suthana's admonition at the shrine that she 'lean into the sharp points,' echoed in her mind. Her hand went to the gray scarf tied to her arm. More than anything else she wanted to be whole and clean in her God's sight. Aroana, have mercy on my soul. "We're full sisters, womb and blood and sire," Aeijys told them. "I was fifteen, Margren twelve. Our High Priest, Sonden, bowing to our ma'aram's insistence, had given Margren one last chance to bond with a wynderjyn yearling. They kept rejecting her."

"So the rumors were true," Cassana said. "It is not unheard of, just infrequent among the noble houses."

Aeijys nodded. "That does not lessen the humiliation. A daughter of a ruling family who can never be more than a simple knight."

"If yer not goin' ta tell it, I will," Tagalong interjected, sliding back into common. "I got a special dispensation ta accompany Aeijys as body servant. They did not want ta give me that much, except that I was an Angtraden and some of the bradae, the priests, and especially Sonden, were wantin' favors from my father and his smiths."

"Now we are getting even farther from the tale!" Tamlestari exclaimed. "Please, Aeijys. I would like to hear it; to understand better."

Aeijys met Tamlestari's eyes and saw there such worship and love as a young warrior bestowed only on a much older lover and mentor. It gently prodded her, as force would not have. "I was one of the older students privileged to help move the

herds to their late spring pasturage. I was just six weeks shy of sixteen. I would never get another chance to do it." Joy at the request. Sonden asking her himself. The touch of his soft hands on her callused ones as she knelt and kissed the Aroanan Rune on his ring. Her stomach tightened still more. The good memories hurt more than the bad ones. "Margren did not want me there. She asked Kaethreyn to persuade me not to go. Or order me." Aejs drew a deep breath and heaved it out again. She stood wincing before her ma'aram's wrath at her refusal. Saw Margren peeping from the doorway, a smug smile on her thin face. "But it was such an honor ... my last summer before my vows that winter. I refused to listen to either of them. Margren avoided me all she could." Margren greeting her with a silent glare, refusing to speak, and stalking off. Publicly snubbing her. "All summer Margren watched the younger girls bonding with their yearlings. I know it hurt her. It would have hurt me. And always the wynderjyns rejected her. In the wee hours of one morning ... I had been trysting with Brendorn in the woods..."

"He was not supposed to be there," Tagalong said.

"I know. I know." Aejs picked up her pipe, filled, and lit it. She took several long draws, and then began again, "I heard a yearling's scream. It was terrified. I left Brendorn and hurried in that direction." Lacing her pants up, staggering half clad, sword in hand, in answer to that terrible cry. "Margren had cornered one, trying to force the bonding."

"That cannot be forced," Cassana said, softly. "Our God decides who will be chosen. The bonding is merely a sign of her favor."

Aejs nodded. "I saw the stud, horn lowered charging Margren. I grabbed my sister and forced her down, shielding her with my body. She fought me like one insane. I could barely hold her. The yearling escaped. The stud left with it. When Margren saw that..." Aejs closed her eyes, unable to go on.

Tagalong finished it. "She cut Aejs twice 'fore Aejs got the dagger away from her. I bound the wounds and we never told anyone except Kaethreyn."

"The cuts were not serious." My first wounds and from the hands of my sister.

"Huh!" Tagalong snorted, "That wasn't fer lack a tryin'! Scored her a good one across the ribs and another up side the head." Tagalong reached to part Aejs' hair, revealing the long scar. Aejs jerked away, blocking Tagalong's hand.

"Don't!" Aejs snapped. Then she again felt their silent faces pressing at her. "Margren worked herself into a hysterical fit. She was so incoherent that no one figured out what had happened. They sedated her and sent her home that afternoon. Afterward they told Kaethreyn that Margren was too emotionally fragile even for knighthood. She did not even get the crumbs... She has always blamed me for her not bonding. For what fell out of that morning."

Tamlestari moved to sit on the cot beside Aejs. "It was not your fault. You did what was right, protected her."

Aejs stroked her lip with the pipe. "Maybe."

"If ya'd been where yer were supposed ta be," Tagalong said unpleasantly, sliding back into her usual Engla Common, "The stud would'a skewered her and we'd have no problems now."

"And when people began to call you the Lion of Rowanslea that must have made her hate you all the more," Cassana mused, half to herself.

"I cannot escape that..." I tried and failed. I cannot go against my nature.

"You can never escape your fame, your legend," Cassana answered.

"Nor can you. You were just fifteen when you followed Kalestari into the wilderness."

"And met Colin. I was a ma'aram at sixteen and a widow at seventeen. I guess I'm living my life in reverse."

"Did you kyndi?" The question came out of the lapsed paladin's mouth before she could stop herself. Aejs winced inwardly at her own bluntness. "Forgive me, I did not mean..."

Cassana stared at her for a moment, startled by the intimacy of the question, as aware now of the silent faces as Aejs had been. Tamlestari moved from Aejs to put her arm around her aunt. Cassana smiled at the reassuring pressure. She sucked in a breath and nodded. All present were people who loved her, whom she felt safe with. And after pressing for details from Aejs, she owed her equal in return. "Yes. Valeda the Jarian wombed my children. Full twins. But it was out of compassion, not love."

Aejs looked away, then back. Compassion children. It was almost as ugly a word in Shaurone as bastard was in the patriarchal outlands. "Valeda always was – is a very kind person. Is she still alive?"

"I don't know. When the children were a year old she left. She was never the same after Darya died."

"You still miss Colin?"

"Yes, I still miss him."

"Eight years is a long time ... to be lonely."



"It's closer to twelve, Aejys."

\* \* \* \*

Except for the sentries, the camp slept. Yet noise filled the night: the dry crackling of the crickets amid the deep boom of frogs singing along the stream banks loudly sounded their end of summer matings and farewells. A lone figure carrying a pilgrim's staff slipped past the sentries and walked the perimeters of the camp, scratching signs of protection on trees and patches of bare earth. So lightly did he move, that neither birds nor grass were disturbed by his passage.

As Eliahu set his wards he saw a movement upstream and a tiny splash of flame as from a fire someone had tried to conceal and not quite succeeded. He paused and watched, trying to discern the forms more clearly, then approached cautiously. One form stood out and he could see that it was huge and vaguely ogrish.

If we are stalked by ogres, I may be forced to reveal myself this night, Eliahu thought. It would not be well to alert whatever powers have allied with Margren Rowan to my presence here.

Nevertheless, he went on. As he drew near he heard three distinct voices, each a separate racial type judging by the nuances: only one of them ogre. He came to the edge of the camp, just to where the low branching trees sheltered him from their eyes and listened.

"You're sure this was a good idea, Josh?" Clemmerick asked. "I'm sure Aejys will be extraordinarily aggravated when we show up."

The big ogre sat, his back to a tree, his huge pack resting against his left knee. Grymlyken stood on his shoulder nibbling on a bit of dark buttery cheese. Josh stalked back and forth before their campfire, his shadow slithering across his companions. One of the biggest horses Eliahu had ever seen nibbled on a bush at far side; at least eighteen hands at the shoulder, dapple gray and blunt nosed. Two wicker panels partly blocked the light on the east side that faced the main camp. Eliahu had no idea what they were for; it seemed a waste to carry them just to partially conceal the fire.

"We gotta keep her from gettin' herself kilt," Josh said, emphasizing each word with a shake of his bottle. "Fell it in ma bones. Gonna get herself kilt." He had said nothing, but the name Abelard still echoed through his dreams at night. Josh had begun to wonder if Abelard was chasing him or if the man was chasing Aejys. Was he the sa'necari Josh saw coupling with Margren in his visions?

"Josh is right," Grymlyken's high small voice broke in. "We're her best bet. Clemmerick cause he's big and strong, me cause I'm resourceful and invisible. Josh because he sees true things when he's had a couple."

Clemmerick looked at the pixie from the corners of his eyes. They could still turn back and Clemmerick wondered if that might be the best move. He did not like the fact that he could not keep Josh sober: he did not dare, for they were tracking Aejys' movements through Josh's inner vision which only awakened on the second drink. None of them had ever tracked anything anywhere in their lives; none of them had the woodcraft to deal with the wild forests successfully; none of them knew how to spot the signs of trouble like the manticore spoor Hanadi had found the day before: Only Josh's drunken perceptions kept them out of misfortune and on the right path. But that meant that every morning Josh was sick and the only drug that eased him was holadil, that expensive elven medicinal which had started the sailor's problems in the first place. And because Josh was sick, Aejys' party pulled ahead of them again. Clemmerick had tried several times to suggest this, but Josh refused to listen.

"And I," Eliahu said, stepping into their small circle.

"Yikes!" Grymlyken yelped and turned invisible.

"It's the cook," Clemmerick said calmly.

Josh turned, pulled himself to his feet, and studied Eliahu with an odd clarity. "Ya're a mage," Josh said. "I ken smell it. Are you Abelard?"

The question stunned Eliahu. "No. I haven't the tiniest fragment of his power. Once there were three brothers. Two of them of the darkest evil. Three Sharani lineages, the Asharan, the Danae, the Rowans, who kept the dark ones from reaching the coast. And then there was Josiah Abelard, Mage Paladin of Kalirion Sun-Lord, God of the Sun, Healing, and Prophecy. Why do you ask?"

"Because the asshole bastard won't quit chasing me." Josh spit and then took another long swig of whiskey and studied Eliahu.

"He's dead, Josh," Clemmerick told his friend. "Five hundred years dead. He can't be chasing you. You're having another one of those weird dreams. That's all. It's okay."

Josh ignored Clemmerick, focusing with increasing intensity upon Eliahu. "Yar a winter mage. Gettin' stronger day by day. Marchin' to the solstice."

"That true?" Clemmerick stood up and squared off in front of Eliahu, prepared to defend his friends.

"Yes. I am Eliahu Solistis, Lord the Iron Glacier, High Mage of Winter. Josh has an amazing talent," Eliahu said. He could feel the waves of power shimmering around the drunken sailor. Even tightly shielded it made his head throb and ache to be so close to him. Josh was arguably the strongest mage Eliahu had encountered, even hobbled as he was by drug and drink.

"Wotta hell ya doin' here?" Josh inquired, taking another swig from his flask, "passing yarself off as a cook."

"A fair question," Eliahu acknowledged. "I was making a pilgrimage to the principal shrines of the Nine Elder Gods, when I chanced upon the duel. The love of Aejs' servants impressed me as much as her courage. I lingered. When I heard that she was hiring for a dangerous quest I sought employment."

"As uh cook?"

"Sometimes the best weapons are those not expected or known. And I am a very good cook. It has been one of my favorite avocations."

"Yar speaking truth. I ken see it in yar aura." Then his voice changed, going deeper and speaking in an accent the mage could not place, "A sword is no less sharp because it is sheathed, mage."

Josh's hand clamped down on Eliahu's wrist with an iron grip. The Lord of the Iron Glacier winced, holding his composure only with great effort before the burning heat of Josh's undisciplined power. Eliahu sent a spell of winter chill through his body in an only half successful attempt to mitigate the pain.

"Two doors locked," Josh said. "Two doors closed. One makes Aejs die, the other live. Find the key. Choose the door. Feel the dragon beneath your feet."

Josh released Eliahu. The Winter Mage stepped back a pace as Josh collapsed, vomiting.

Clemmerick's eyes narrowed in a frown of concern and worry. He reached beside his pack, bringing out a satchel of medicinals that Eliahu had not noticed before. The ogre picked Josh up, waited for him to finish vomiting, and dosed him with a golden liquid. "It does not usually happen before morning," the ogre explained, helplessness heavy in his deep voice. Josh nestled down in Clemmerick's big arms, whimpering with pain and discomfort as he slowly slid into drugged slumber.

Eliahu nodded, realizing what the wicker flats were: a rectangular pannier and a litter that counter-balanced each other when hung from the sides of the big horse. "The power only comes out when he drinks? Is that what Grymlyken meant?"

"Yes." Grymlyken and Clemmerick said at once.

"It would be better if he could access it without the drink."

"It would be better for Josh if he could not access it at all," remarked Clemmerick bitterly. "It frightens him. He doesn't want it."

"Deep down inside myself, I fear that Josh stands strongest of us all in Aejs'

defense," Eliahu said, "and in our hour of greatest need I will be the first to offer him the cup. However I will try to brew something that will serve as well but do him less harm."

"I would be grateful if you could," said Clemmerick.

"And I," said Grymlyken.

"Now I must return before they find I am gone. And I must think about those words of his."

\* \* \* \*

Aejys and her lieutenants breakfasted. It gave her an opportunity to outline the paths they were taking and what they might expect that day. She had been up since the wee hours, walking the perimeters and speaking with the sentries.

Hanadi sat on the ground near the flap, whetting a long knife. Tagalong perched cross-legged on the cedar chest. Tamlestari took the campstool nearest Aejys and Johannes the other. Cassana sat on the ground with her back resting against the cot. Aejys sat upon the cot as if it were a throne.

"I found fresh manticore spoor near the west end this morning," Aejys told them. "The beasts are checking us out."

"My myn have never fought anything like that," Johannes said.

"Then they'll learn fast," Aejys replied, turning to Hanadi, "Has Brundarad come in?"

"No."

"Would you know if he found trouble?"

"Hmnp! We would hear my pet half a league away if he were in difficulties," Hanadi said. "You have not heard him bay. He is louder than a pack of coursing hounds. And there is our bond." She thumbed the knife, gave a grunt, and sheathed it before sucking her thumb satisfied.

"Hanadi's people, Aejys said to Johannes, "fought in the Great War, they're drawn from Jon Dawn's Legion. They have experience with manticores and worse. Your myn would do well to follow their example when we come to it. In fact Hanadi's units are the only ones experienced in the type of warfare we may find our Eldari in."

A smug smile lit Hanadi's dark face.

Johannes scowled. "My myn learn quickly. There are no white feathers among

them."

Aejys stood, indicating that they had finished. As she picked up her shield and started outside a man screamed and died on the west end of camp. The three wynderjyns shrilled their challenge and Gwyndar scented the threat, added whinnying "manticores."

"Arm and mount!" Aejys shouted, her lieutenants picking up the cry.

Tagalong thudded down the middle of the camp as quick as her short legs could carry her, marshaling the archers as she went. They formed up behind her while six slingers moved to flank her.

Johannes did not bother to mount. Ahead of him a mixed group of swordsmyn, caught unawares by the huge beasts, fought on foot trying to form a line between the beasts and the handful of archers who had been surprised along with them. Shouting commands to his myn he strode to the front of the ragged line.

Aejys' left arm was stiff and sore as she shoved it into the shield straps. "Archers! Pick your targets!" Aejys shouted, snatching up her lance and mounting. "Throat! Head! Feather their faces! Lancers to me!" Gwyndar charged. Cassana and Tamlestari flanked Aejys, a line of mercenary and Guild lancers formed up behind her as she galloped past. Aejys could see the creatures then, six of the usually solitary monsters striking with their scorpion tails and lion's claws. Then she couched her lance and charged the foremost mantichore. The archers and warriors on foot opened ranks, to let the heavy cavalry pass.

Aejys caught the first pass of its stinger on her shield without breaking stride and drove the lance deep into the mantichore's breast. It rolled thrashing on the ground in its death agony. The scorpion like stinger of another caught one of the mercenaries in the neck and he fell screaming.

"Ware the stinger!" Aejys shouted, drawing her sword. Another snapped its tail at her. She sliced the stinger off. Gwyndar reared striking with his hooves and the huge beast brought its claws into play. Gwyndar pivoted, biting and kicking as Aejys cut first at the mantichore's claws, then at its head. A third closed on her. In avoiding the stinger Gwyndar lost his footing and fell heavily, throwing Aejys.

The impact on her half healed arm knocked the breath from her and for the space of nearly a minute she couldn't move. The mantichore that had lost its stinger sprang at her. A booming dwarven battle cry came behind her and a huge hammer flew past, shattering the skull like an over ripe melon. Tagalong Smith entered the fray, leading the swordsmyn. She stood over Aejys as the lapsed paladin regained her feet.

"I'm okay, Tag. Let's take out that one."

Aejys led them in. They cut away the stinger and maimed the claws before finally

hacking it to death.

Hanadi snatched the lance of a fallen rider, sprang to the saddle, and charged the fourth monster. She used her shield as she had seen Aejs do and drove the lance into its chest as it reared.

Aejs turned looking for another to fight and saw that all six were dead. Manticores did not range in packs; they were solitary creatures, coming together only to mate. Clearly they had been summoned to attack them. She noticed then that each wore a broad leather collar with a dangling golden charm. Aejs cut the collar from one of them and held the charm in her hands. A stylized Waejontori dragon, wings spread, with rowan trees clutched in its claws adorned the charm.

"Margren?" Tagalong asked, coming to stand at her elbow.

"Possibly," Aejs answered, "But if so she has allied herself with Waejontor. Isn't this like the one you described Jon Dawn as having?"

"It's identical."

\* \* \* \*

Aejs doubled the watch while the camp licked its wounds. Her losses were relatively light. Four mercenaries, two guildsmyn and two horses dead; five mercenaries wounded, two seriously; and one guildsmyn lancer crippled beyond mending, his legs ripped to pieces – he would be lucky if he did not lose them. Their losses would have been far worse had not the Guildsmyn and Aejs been experienced with such monsters.

They shifted part of the baggage to the surviving mounts of the seriously wounded and the dead so that the former could be laid in the wagons. Aejs ordered the slain to be burned. The mercenaries balked, but Hanadi backed her up. Aejs knew that if the Waejontoris were involved then the undead could not be far behind and she did not want to add to their ranks.

They broke camp around midday. The place among the trees was not defensible. Some of Hanadi's people skinned a mantichore while waiting to set out, taking also the teeth, claws, and any usable parts. The meat was abandoned, as they didn't have sufficient means to carry it along: as if any but an orc would eat such meat. Eliahu persuaded one enthusiastic mercenary to get him a heart and two livers. He also carefully removed a severed stinger, wrapped it. These things he carefully spelled frozen and concealed among his supplies. He was operating on intuition, for a small inner voice had whispered to him, and felt unsure what to do with them.

As night drew around them and Aejs pushed on, Tagalong became uneasy. "Aejs, you promised no forced marches."

"There's a defensible position at the crest of Tarmus Ardren Pass. It narrows and they can only come at us one at a time. A few days past that will land us at the Willodarian Monastery of St. Tarmus of Lorendon. We can rest there."

"Aejys, this isn't good for ya... Yar wounds..."

"Hell shitting damnation, Tag! Getting eaten by a manticore isn't good for me either!"

"Ya think they're comin' back?"

"Hell, what do you think, Tag?"

"They're comin back."

"She may hit us with something else. I don't know. I do know this is why I was told to bring an army. At this rate we'll make the monastery in three – four days at the most. I can lick my wounds there if they need licking."

They marched until dawn, myn, horses, and all dragging as the sun seared across the horizon in shades of flame. The wagons struggled along, slowing their pace. They failed to reach the Pass and camped in a rocky hollow further up the mountains.

\* \* \* \*

They broke camp in the mid afternoon, riding until moonset when they made camp again in the wee hours before dawn. By the morning of the third day of forced marching Aejys ached in every muscle and felt worn to the bone. She began to acknowledge that Tagalong might be right: she had not given herself enough time to heal from the duel and the pace was proving too strenuous for her. But that did not mean that she intended to give in any more than she could avoid. She had to see this through as quickly as possible.

Aejys had just stretched out on her cot when she heard shouts and sat up. She listened a second and decided that, while they were excited, it did not sound like the alarm of attack. Tamlestari poked her head into the tent.

"What is it?" Aejys asked.

"Brundarad returns and he's dragging something."

Aejys spied a commotion on the south end and strode in that direction, falling in beside Hanadi.

"What has he got?"

"We will know in only a moment."

Aejys shouldered through. Myn started to complain at the jostling, but seeing who it was acquiesced into silence, opening ranks to let her pass.

Hanadi dropped to her knees beside the big animal, pulling a roundish object from his jaws. Aejys bent beside her and growled wordlessly as she took the thing from Hanadi and turned it over in her hands.

It was a green skinned head with shaggy black hair and a tusked mouth, clammy with death and already beginning to smell.

"Orc," they said together.

"There were no orcs in this region after the war," Aejys said. "Their hunting grounds are northeast above the Cherdon'datar."

Brundarad spoke to Hanadi in a series of strange barks and growls and whines. Hanadi's face lost all expression as she listened. "He says he came across two groups of five. They appeared to be scouts. He has not yet found the main force, but thinks it will be a large one."

"Gobbies, my myn can fight easily," Johannes said.

Aejys looked up, noticing him for the first time. "Yes, I imagine they can," she observed dryly.

"I shall send Brundarad out again. He can range far and then follow our bond back to me."

Aejys nodded. "See if he can find that main force quickly, Hanadi. I don't want to come on them unawares or they on us. Break camp quickly, give the orders. And we will not march past dusk this time. I am not taking any chances of blundering into them in the dark."

\* \* \* \*

Over the next days the company set a brisk pace to make up for the lessened hours of march. No watch fires were set. Dinners were served cold: just bread, cheese, dried fruits, and salmon charki. Nor was there any singing or music in the camp. Nothing to tell the orcs where to find them. Tempers frayed, especially between the red ribbons and the green leading to minor scuffling. Although the green knew all about the red, the red knew nothing about the green and dark speculations ensued as to where they had come from considering that they were clearly veteran units from the Great War. The high meadows had given way to sheer craggy cliffs where the snow lingered. The trees grew sparse and twisted, mostly pines and mountain ash. Despite all efforts, however, they reached the Tarmus Ardren pass three days later



than Aeijys had hoped.

The pass was a narrow slice cut between two sheer walls of gray stone. The east end was half blocked by a fall of rock that had to be partially removed before the wagons could get through. Aeijys set a double guard on the west end. With the boulders and mountain wall to shield them she allowed Eliahu a small fire and he set to cooking enthusiastically.

As Aeijys walked to the east end to personally let the myn moving rocks know that they would have a better meal that night the sounds of a fight erupted. Aeijys arrived as the assembled myn started laying bets. It looked to Aeijys to be no contest. The big mercenary, Jeord, straddled a much smaller mon whom Aeijys recognized as one of Hanadi's people, hammering him with his big fists.

"Let him up!" Aeijys ordered.

The huge mercenary either did not hear her in the heat of the moment or simply ignored her. He continued to slam the small green who struggled vainly to free himself.

Aeijys seized Jeord from behind pulling him bodily off the smaller man. She slid her arms under his and locked her hands together at the base of his neck. She reared back, her hands pressing down and forward with sufficient force to snap his neck if necessary. The eldritch strength of Sharani women was a legend in the outlands, but in that moment, as the big man strained vainly against the arms that held him like iron bars, it became a fact for all present. Thus she ensured that Johannes' myn would walk more lightly in the presence of the women of her company.

An awed sound rippled through those watching. Johannes, arriving too late to intervene, gawked for he had never seen Jeord bested at anything.

"This never happens again," Aeijys snarled to Jeord. "Next time I'll snap your fool neck! Understand?"

Jeord mumbled.

"Understand me?"

"Yes."

Aeijys released him and Jeord moved off to finish his work.

"Are you all right?" Tamlestari asked, reaching for Aeijys.

"I'm fine," Aeijys said, shrugging away from the girl before she could touch her. "Take care of him," she indicated the small green, "then come to my tent."

"Yes, of course," Tamlestari said.

\* \* \* \*

Hanadi fell into step beside the lapsed paladin. Aejs walked with a strong sure stride until the tent flap closed, blocking the view of the outsiders. Then she dropped down on her cot and the color faded from her face.

Tamlestari, coming in behind them, caught her hand and read the pain in the healing arm. "It's never going to heal right if you don't stop doing things like that," she scolded.

"I didn't have a choice," Aejs answered tiredly. "If I had not intervened they might have questioned my authority. Furthermore, I hold this company together. I don't want it deteriorating into warring factions before we even reach Shaurone, much less Rowanslea. And I need them to understand that the prowess of my people, and by extension the women in my household and Hanadi's units, is equal to their reputation. I'll have less trouble that way."

"She is right, girl," Hanadi said, "To be the leader she must be the strongest and smartest. Not just the coffers. Money speaks in cities, but strength speaks on the road when most of the help is hired. We have three factions here, my people whose allegiance is to me first and Aejs second. Johannes people whose allegiance is to him first and Aejs second. And then we have those who are members of Aejs' household or wish to be and have hired on in hopes of being taken into her household after this is done. They give their primary allegiance to Aejs."

"I was told by Aroana herself, speaking through her priest, to hire these people," Aejs said tiredly. "So there is a reason for it."

"Assuredly so," Hanadi said, starting to get Aejs out of her mail hauberk. "Let us see that arm. And the side too."

The wounds were cracked and chafed around the half-healed edges. Tamlestari smeared on a salve. "Maybe if we padded it more the hauberk would not irritate them. That's half the problem, I think."

"There are extra blankets in the supply wagon," Hanadi told her.

"That would do it. Cut one up into pads. That will make the hauberk a bit tight, but not uncomfortably so..."

\* \* \* \*

Tagalong had arrived in time to see Aejs force the big man off the smaller one. She had been watching Jeord try and push his weight around for some time. So she trailed after him.

"That bitch nearly broke my neck," Jeord grumbled, rubbing his neck.

"That bitch is yar employer," Tagalong said amiably. "This the first time ya worked fer a woman?"

"What if it is?" Jeord said suspiciously.

"Ya do know I'm second in command?"

"Yah, second bitch," Jeord said and guffawed.

Around him his companions looked uneasy and started moving away from him. They read from Tagalong's stance that the dwarf had come looking for trouble and the big dull-witted Jeord was about to find it.

"I don't like yar attitude, gritch," Tagalong said. "Maybe yar one a them cockglans bastards I been hearin' about ever since I came west."

Jeord turned red. A crowd had gathered – the same ones that had circled Jeord earlier. Several people laughed at him: the big man being backed down by a dwarf woman.

He gave a roar and grabbed at Tagalong. She deftly avoided him, snagged his wrist, and doubled him over with an armbar. Then she gave him two swift kicks in the side. Tagalong released him and he staggered a few steps before righting himself and charging back at her. His big fists hammered down at her. Tagalong charged in under them, catching him in the stomach before he could adjust to her new location. Then she reached in between his legs, her hands closing on his balls through the loose cloth of his trousers and she wrenched them. Jeord collapsed with a scream, writhing. A smaller man than Jeord, but broad through the chest and similar in build to him, knelt beside him.

"Mei ajan, forgive Jeord," he said, "Though he is big and strong and good with his weapons, he is not very bright. He is easily misled. But I will keep him out of trouble from now on."

"An' who are ya ta speak for him?" Tagalong demanded harshly.

"Ragnar, his brother."

"Too bad ya can't pick yer relatives." A touch of rue entered her voice. Tagalong knew that her own more aristocratic relatives applied the same statement to her.

Beside Ragnar, the recovering Jeord nodded agreement with eyes wide.

Tagalong glared around her at the rest. "Now, who's next?"

"This one, I think, maybe?" Jaqui's small hand held a longsword, the blade just under a mon's chin. At his feet lay a dagger that he had dropped when her blade touched him.

"Any of ya don't like it, get out, and get out now! Ya can go pull yar wages an' go back an' get eat by some of the things that been followin' us. This time tomorrow we'll be at the monastery of St. Tarmus the Willodarian at Lorendon Crossing. Ya step outta line there and the monks will have the bears eat ya. The ones they don't get I will, understood?"

"I will keep my men out of trouble," Johannes said approaching. "I spoke to them. Cautioned them. But thought it best to let them see for themselves."

"Surely," said Hanadi, arriving just then, "Even the stupidest of them knows now to follow orders and to walk the narrow path between heaven and hell."

Jaqui grinned, re-sheathing her sword. That brought a sigh of relief from the mercenary, which changed to a grunt as her foot connected with his bottom and she sent him sprawling on his face. "Next time, bucco, you draw on someone's back I'll carve my name on your cheeks! Both sets!"

\* \* \* \*

"You have heard nothing more about Laeoli?" Tamlestari asked as they gathered for a counsel before breaking camp.

Hanadi shook her head with slow expressiveness. "Very little. Ladonys regained full consciousness two days ago. She saw Laeoli fall into the river. It may be that she has thus preserved herself and lays hidden, licking her wounds."

"That's the only hope I have left," Aeijys said. "If Margren arranged this," her voice tightened with anger, then softened as her hand went to the gray scarf on her arm, "my vow forbids me vengeance." What good is honor, Aroana God, if it means I can neither save nor avenge my child.

"Then add another hope to that one," Hanadi said. "Assuming she lives, hope that Margren's people do not find her first, for assuredly they too search for her."

\* \* \* \*

Mephistis held court in a small, private audience room down a long hall from Chamber of Hecatomb. Two throne chairs near a small fireplace dominated the room. Their fan-shaped backs bore Margren's secret crest, the dragon and rowans, with the dragon's claws descending to form the arms. Margren sat beside him, her face a study in anticipation. Bodramet accompanied by two guards forced a young Sharani peasant to her knees before Mephistis, manacled her wrists to her ankles

before stepping back to assume a position of attentive waiting. Behind and to the left side of them stood four more guards. Bodramet ran his amaranthine eyes – devoid of whites, pupils and irises, hungrily over another pair of captives: a pair of young, auburn-haired Valdren males, nude but for their heavy shackles.

Mephistis stroked the peasant's hair, drinking in the fear in the trembling of her body. "You should be far enough along in the change, my dearest, to manage this," he purred, nuzzling the woman's throat, feeling the delicious throbbing of her pulse as he ran his rough tongue along the artery. He extended his hand to Margren, drawing her from her chair. "Link and follow me, then take one of those for your own." He indicated the Valdren pair.

Mephistis caressed Margren's face with languid sensuality. "Taking blood this way can heal almost any wound."

"It's like being a vampire..." A hot eagerness underlined her words. She placed her hand on the back of Mephistis' neck in link.

Mephistis laughed. "No, they are like us. Sa'necari devour life in many, many ways. This is just..." he paused to touch her again, "a very pleasurable one. To become sa'necari is to attain the highest, most powerful transformation our necromancers and banewitches have been able to discover. All the powers of the undead possessed by the living."

Margren gave him a look that told him she was utterly and completely his. But then, he told himself, she had always been his – ever since the winter that he first encountered Aejs and Margren, the former ten and the latter just six years old. He found Margren hiding in a torn up snow fort the castle children had built in the keep's garden before traipsing off after Aejs and abandoning the smallest child. Eleven-year-old Mephistis comforted Margren, luring her deep into the nearby bushes where he took blood from her. Margren remembered it only as a dream; an oddly warm, comforting dream. Every year afterward he came to her again at winter's solstice in the garden at night, taking blood from her and in her ninth year sharing his own. It was the taint of his blood in Margren's body that caused the unicorn stud at the high meadows to drive her off each year.

At ten, Margren's body as well as her veins opened to him and he took her sexually. Then three years before the war, he revealed himself to her on Dragonshead as something more than a pleasant solstice dream.

Mephistis turned his attention back to his captive, kissing and nuzzling the girl who had begun to whimper. His fangs extended as he felt the girl's pulsing artery beneath his lips. A ticklish itch crawled down his tongue, twining in his throat. His fangs entered the artery, sending a warm gush of blood into his mouth. The girl gasped sharply at the pain, stiffening, then going limp as her heart stilled.

Margren's low moaning drew his attention and he lifted his mouth from the dead

girl's throat, blood dribbling down into his beard. He smiled at the glazed look in Margren's eyes. "Bring her that one," he told the guards. "Bodramet, you may rite the third as reward for bringing us this catch."

The youth twisted, struggling vainly against the guards who threw him face down before Margren. Mephistis caught the youth by the hair, wrenching his head around until he could not move. The second youth screamed as Margren's fangs extended and she threw herself hungrily onto his companion. Blood filled Margren's mouth, she slurped, drinking greedily, letting the warmth and electricity of the blood send tingles of ecstasy racing through her.

Mephistis stroked Margren's head fondly, watching her drain the youth dry. "Sylvan blood is one of the finest vintages in all the world," he murmured.

The body, a gray and shriveled husk now, fell away as Margren released it.

\* \* \* \*

Isranon heard the soft, sad strains of Juldrid's lute before he had walked far into the dense woods near the hunter's trace that led from the bluffs to the valley. He wondered what Margren had done to her this time ... or had his prince done it? A sick anger coiled in his stomach as he lifted the flute to his lips and began to play. Isranon let the music announce his presence to that he did not come suddenly upon her and frighten her. He shouldered his way through a tangle of trembling aspen and a tighter knot of evergreens until he could see her.

Juldrid wore the black of mourning, which made her look very pale. He wondered what she was mourning over. Rose crouched beside her, listening and, from time to time, patting her shoulder comfortingly. The little nibari's intercession had allowed Isranon to get closer and closer to Juldrid over the past months.

He settled cross-legged a short distance from them. He found the rhythms of the song she played and joined her in them. Juldrid gifted him with a small, sad smile, and nodded. Then she began to sing. Isranon's grasp of common was limited since it was rarely spoken in Waejontor, yet after a while he realized it was a very old song about rape and grief, suicide and the fall of houses. It made him shiver.

As always they played until dark when Juldrid rose to leave. This time Isranon took a chance and caught her arm. She flinched, her eyes widening with fear, but he did not let her go until he could get the words out. "Mephistis raped you, didn't he?"

"Yes."

Isranon released her arm and Juldrid fled. He prayed he had not ruined their tentative relationship. He dropped back to the ground, feeling numb now as he retreated into the silences. Having his fears confirmed did not make it better, if anything it made it worse. Rose crept up to him and laid her head in his lap.

"All sa'necari are like that," she said, confirming his beliefs. "But you are not sa'necari."

Isranon lowered the flute again without beginning another song. "I know that. A lion must be a lion, or the others devour him ... and yet ... I feel for her." In Waejontor women were property, except among the sa'necari whose women were sometimes strong enough to eat their mates.

"She carries his child as well as the one Margren put there. Two sons for your prince."

Two heirs for his prince, what a wondrous thought! But such a tragic way to get them. Isranon pitied Juldrid. He put the flute away. Rose turned her head to the side, waiting for the touch of his fangs. Instead he began to undress her.

"If I got a child on you," Isranon said. "By law, they would not be allowed to harm you." Sa'necari born were too rare and only their longevity made up for it. He hoped that, having not crossed the line in the rites, he would prove more fertile than the others. And taking a non-sa'necari increased the chances. "Will you allow me to try?"

Rose arched up, presenting herself to him and shrugging out of her dress. "You are the only one who bothers to ask... I have had many sa'necari inside me, whether I wished it or no. I love you, Isranon."

"And I, you." Isranon realized that he was trembling as he opened his own clothing and Rose's soft, gentle fingers closed on his cock.

## CHAPTER EIGHT. CALLTHUNDER

A soft rustle of movement woke Aejs in the last hour before dawn. Her right hand, beneath the pillow, slithered instinctively to the Aroanan Rune sword leaning against the cot. Her heart quickened with a rush of adrenaline that preceded strong action. She controlled her urge to act in favor of identifying the threat first. The recklessness of youth had long ago been schooled out of her by experience. She cracked her lids just enough to see without giving any sign of wakefulness. In the pre-dawn darkness she could not make out anything. Then a warm wet tongue swiped across her face as a sudden heavy weight was added to hers overturning the cot. Aejs crashed to the ground in a tangle of blankets. She lost her sword as she struggled to free herself of the bedding and the cot that had come down on top of everything. She could feel the thing's huge body moving half beneath her separated from her by the bedding; could smell its oddly familiar muskiness. With a tremendous heave the creature came free of Aejs and the blankets. It rose on all fours and shook itself, then turned glowing green eyes on the lapsed paladin. It shoved a wiry muzzle into her face; its rough wet tongue covering her mouth, nose and cheeks with slobber. "Hey!" she shouted and

the next lick caught her inside the mouth. Aeijys spit, her eyes snapped open and she stared into the grizzled face of the shadow hound.

"Damn it, Brundarad!" Aeijys cursed. "We're not that close!" With an effort she shoved free of the huge beast and sat up. She wiped the slobbery wetness from her face with a corner of the nearest blanket.

Brundarad settled on his haunches, head tilted, regarding her with knit brows and an expression that Aeijys swore had to be offended puzzlement.

A small laugh from the door turned Aeijys' attention. Hanadi stood there, framed by firelight that touched the edges of her dark hair with the orange of flame, the faintest of smiles on her lips, which quickly disappeared behind her usual polite mask.

"What has happened?" Aeijys asked, a tremor of concern touched her for although her forces were, in their own ways, experienced, she could not yet gauge how well they would meet the kinds of threats she only now began to suspect, much less realize, Margren could throw at them. A commander always planned for contingencies; but Aeijys knew too well that many times the situations that developed were not those expected or planned for. Survival was more often nothing more than a throw of the dice no matter how capable the commander or how strong the units. There was no such thing as an invincible army: some fell harder and others easier, nothing more. Each time myn died in her command, Aeijys cared. She remembered her newest dead slain by the manticores the week past. She had not known them personally, but she cared. And in the seconds between her question and Hanadi's answer her mind raced through all of that.

"Brundarad, he has scented the monastery's guardians," Hanadi said. "They have been observing us since moonrise." She knelt beside the shadow hound, draping her arm around his neck and holding him close. "All your myn must be alerted to show no fear of them. They will scent that and possibly be provoked by it. Also they must harm no animals, no matter how small or how large and frightening. And the deer must not be hunted."

Aeijys nodded as she righted the cot and shoved the bedding into a rumpled heap atop it. "I have been here before. As you have?"

Hanadi's polite inclining of her head was all the answer Aeijys got.

"I will have Tag alert them, Hanadi. You speak to your own people?"

"Of course."

Aeijys shoved the tumbled bedding back some more, then sat down on a clear spot and pulled on her boots. "Fetch Johannes. I want to brief him myself on what to expect and the code of behavior our situation demands. I don't need any loose bravos causing trouble. On second thought, wake the camp. Quietly. I'll address



them all before we ride."

The Euzadi favored her with another of her rare small smiles and withdrew, the shadow hound following her out.

\* \* \* \*

Hanadi woke Tagalong, the Odarens, and Johannes. They in turn roused the camp. Each lieutenant made it clear to their units that nothing was wrong, they were entering a new territory, and Aeijys wanted to speak to them all as a group. Eliahu got breakfast started immediately and then stood by his huge heating kettles to listen. He leaned upon his staff, his eyes soft and distant, seeming lost in his own thoughts. He noted that Aeijys limped slightly as if her side were hurting her again as he had no doubt it probably was. Because of its location, the long hours on horseback and her mail must keep it sore and aching. There were many things he could have done to help if he had dared reveal himself yet, but he held back. Once Aeijys and her lieutenants knew his true nature, he felt certain that Margren would know also. Then she would add him into her calculations. Eliahu had no idea how much or how little she might know concerning the powers of the Winter Mages of the Iron Glacier and did not want to take any chances. Even a mage did not survive long on the Iron Glacier if he took too many unconsidered chances. Patience and restraint were the first survival skills their children learned. And Eliahu had learned them well from the claws of a wolverine when he was but ten.

The fact that Aeijys did not spare herself on this march impressed him. She moved with the confidence of one accustomed to command, but without arrogance or excessive pride, through the ranks of the gathered myn who gave way to her with small words of respect on the lips of many. Her lieutenants walked at her back. She halted in the center beside the fire, her chain mail catching the light which gilded it with orange along one side while the first golden light of dawn which could not yet reach them, left the other a dull shadowed gray. Her gloved hand rested casually on the pommel of her sword. The black band showed on her right arm while the gray scarf of penitence on her left was almost invisible in the half-light. Her expression was grave, but not worried. The matter she would speak of was serious, but not yet a danger. And Eliahu knew what she would say before she spoke, for he had already sensed the watchers. He respected her straightforward way of handling things that concerned her myn.

"We are entering the Valley of Saint Tarmus," said Aeijys. "We camped at their pass two days ago. We are being watched by the monastery's guardians. The Blood Bears of Willodarus. There is a truce here with all the wild creatures. Whatever creatures you see here ... whatever natural creatures, and I stress natural. Willodarus has no more use for the twisted creatures of darkness than you do. Less, because they prey upon his own. There are no manticores to be found here. The bears and lions take them down when they do.

"Do not assume that any bears or lions are going to attack just because they approach. Don't strike or harm anything that has not left a claw mark on you first. There is no hunting in this valley. If a rat tries to take your food, let it. If a chipmunk or squirrel investigates your pack, let it. If you hurt the smallest creature, especially the smallest creatures, the bears will treat you in kind."

A man sniggered and another elbowed him in the ribs. But Aeijys had seen him and moved through the crowd toward him. The others stepped away from him. Aeijys skewered him with a glance. "Have you seen what a grizzled bear can do to a mon?"

The soldier, a red ribbon, glanced briefly for support, found none, then nodded.

"Now multiply that by ten. A dozen blood bears can pull down a dragon. You want to argue with them? If I throw you out of camp, they'll come down and investigate you. Tempt me and I'll do it."

The soldier paled. Aeijys moved back into the center. Most of Johannes' mercenaries were gradually accepting the hands-on leadership of the Sharani mon who had hired them, but there were still a few troublemakers and doubters who were not comfortable with a woman in command. They needed to learn that Aeijys would be as quick to punish as Johannes. She wished she had had time to weed them out before starting.

"Now then. There are enough blood bears and mountain cats around here to take us all out. Every last one of us. We enter their valley on their forbearance and that of their god. You don't give them any trouble and they won't give us any trouble, understood?"

A chorus of 'ayes' went up.

"And another thing. The brothers in this monastery are sylvans, drawn from all the six races. I hear about any racial slurs or rudeness and I'll personally administer fifty lashes to the speaker. Dismissed. Get some food and pack up. We are breaking camp early."

\* \* \* \*

They traveled the edge of a cliff on a wide path cut out of the mountain with a short natural wall rising on their right. The ground was stone worn smooth as silk cloth. The broad sky glowed a deep blue. Trees growing out of the mountain's side rose above the wall. Those who looked down from beside the wall could see a broad valley filled with maples, scarlet with the first touch of autumn chill, and oaks with a scattering of tall, broad crowned elms. Squirrels ran fearlessly along the wall within easy reach of the soldiers who ignored them determinedly. Some jumped from tree to tree, branches dipping and swaying as they paused to watch the newcomers. A great hawk, its umber brown feathers contrasting against the green, settled on a branch ignoring the squirrels, for along the path a truce held even among the animals

themselves. The hawk might hunt the valley, but not the path and the monastery grounds, which were sacrosanct to Willodarus.

The path widened abruptly. Stone gave way to dirt and grass, which in turn gave way to scattered maples and oaks. Then the Monastery of St. Tarmus came into view.

Sturdy walls surrounded it, their crenellations filled with the drooping twiggy layers of bird nests, undisturbed for centuries, looked like short blunt teeth with the messy remains of breakfast caught between them. The heavy oaken gates stood open, they were rarely closed. A dozen brothers in plain robes of dusty brown, their cowls settled back upon their slender shoulders stood before the open gates to greet Aejys and her entourage. The abbot leaned slightly upon his crozier, a staff of black ash intertwined with delicately wrought silver leaves and topped with the bear rune of Willodarus. Ancient, even for one of the sylvan races, his ivory face was a study in yellow lines and folds of age. Black hair trimmed close to his head and cobalt eyes sharp with intelligence regarded them. As Aejys and her lieutenants dismounted, the abbot came forward smiling. He limped, listing a little to one side and then the other. The ancient sylvan wore braces on both legs, which were concealed by his long robes, but he moved with the comfortable acceptance of one who had long ago made peace with the childhood misfortune that necessitated them. In fact he tended to forget about them except when faced with something he could not do.

The lapsed paladin dropped to one knee, took his gnarled, withered hand, and kissed the ring upon his finger. The gesture of respect was neither demanded nor required, for Aejys did not serve Willodarus, but her respect for the old sylvan ran deep as did her courtier's manners when the situation seemed to deserve them. And the lapsed paladin, conscious always of the example she set her myn, felt her actions validated as her lieutenants repeated her gesture as she introduced each one.

"Tut, tut! Old friend," he whispered into Aejys' ear as the paladin then embraced him warmly, "such formality!" But although he seemed to dismiss it all, his voice and face glowed with pleasure.

"Father Keikero," she said, "it is so good to see you so well!"

"And you, my friend," Abbot Keikero responded happily. "You have prospered in your exile."

"Indeed I have," Aejys said. "Vorgensburg has been good to me. These are the myn of my household. I ask leave to camp them in your courtyard. It has been a hard journey and we have several wounded who need your brothers' talents."

Keikero frowned in concern. "Of course! Bring them in!" He gestured to the watching brothers. Two he dispatched to alert the healers and ready beds. Others, at Cassana's nod, followed her among the wagons to bring out the wounded.

"What happened?" Keikero asked, starting back toward the gates beside Aejs.

"Manticores," Aejs said, her tone going low and dark. "A pack of them."

"A pack, you say? But manticores are solitary..."

Aejs drew the little disk from her pocket and pressed it into the abbot's hand.

"Later, when I have seen to my myn we can discuss this."

Abbot Keikero opened his hand and glanced at the disk, closing his hand as soon as he saw what it was. "A serious matter."

The shadow hound emerged from a dark corner beside the gates rubbing against the abbot and rumbling happily. The abbot looked startled, as if he could scarcely believe his eyes, then dropped to his knees and hugged the fearsome beast. "Well! Brundarad! I never expected to see you again. Falling down a waterfall is usually fatal, you know."

Brundarad whined.

"Ahhhh!" The abbot said with a knowing glance at Hanadi. "And very fine she is too. Yes, you may have your old room." Keikero made a gesture of benediction and said so softly no one but Brundarad could hear, "May she give you many litters. And Brundarad, we would be greatly honored if, when the time comes, you would have the birthing here."

Brundarad gave a series of noises from deep in his throat that brought a beaming smile to the abbot's face.

Aejs offered Keikero her hand to get back to his feet and he accepted it. The abbot slipped an arm around Aejs' shoulders, "Will you too have your old rooms?" he asked, walking beside her.

Aejs shook her head, "I bivouac with my myn. However, I would take great pleasure in a long hot bath once I get them settled."

\* \* \* \*

They trailed Aejs as far as the edge of the stone path cut into the side of the mountain. Clemmerick recognized it as mynmade and decided not to start down it until Josh could take a Reading on it. He saw hours-old horse droppings on the path and knew that they had gone that way. They were finally closing the distance that that widened between them and Aejs' company during the early part of the march when Josh had not been physically able to handle a faster pace; but as the alcoholic sailor-mage had got better accustomed to traveling in a huge basket attached to Clemmerick's tremendous horse, they had begun to gain ground. They had almost caught up to them when the manticores attacked, but Josh's body had taken that

moment to be sick and they had fallen behind again. The ogre helped Josh from the big horse. The sailor stretched and settled to the ground beneath a blue spruce. Clemmerick poked Grymlyken who was sleeping in his pocket. The tiny warrior yawned and climbed out onto the ogre's shoulder.

"What is this place?" he asked.

"Ask Josh," Clemmerick said.

Josh gave them a sidewise glance. He pulled his flask from his pocket, staring at it for several moments. He thought about how much he would hurt the next day, how tender and sore his stomach got after a night of drinking. All the muscles and nerves of his body seemed to crawl and tremble. A drink would stop that. Josh ran his tongue over his lips, thinking how that initial rush of fire would feel when he took the first big swallow. And he thought about the way the power would manifest, which frightened him, but he could not access it sober.

"Aejys needs us, Josh," Clemmerick said gently.

Josh nodded. He opened the flask, brought it to his lips, and tilted his head back. He gulped down three jiggers of Iradrim whiskey before pausing for air and lowering the flask. Josh grimaced as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve: he did not drink it for the taste. Fire raced through his veins, filled his head. He leaned back against a tree. His eyes lit with a strange brightness and his face flushed with the strength of the drink.

"We have been watched," he said in a low, rough voice. "The path leads to..." He closed his eyes and listened, then dug his fingers into the dirt. "Yes, I have it now. The Monastery of St. Tarmus the Willodarian."

Clemmerick built a small fire and took out his frying pan. He threw a little fat into the pan and while it sizzled he took out bread and cheese. He sliced the bread, laid the cheese on top of it, and put it in the pan. He put a lid over it to keep the heat in.

"Blood bears and mountains cats," Josh said, his strange gaze traveling all about the little clearing. "They will not let us go further ... unless I speak with them." He took another drink and grimaced, wiping his mouth off.

Grymlyken, warming himself by the fire, looked spooked. "Talk to 'em?" He drew his cloak around himself and disappeared.

Josh threw back his head and howled. Clemmerick shivered at the inhuman sound. When Josh howled again, the ogre hunched down and covered his ears. From nearby a bear roared. Then another and another. Josh howled again. The answering roars went on for several minutes that seemed like hours. Grymlyken retreated to Clemmerick's pocket. Clemmerick struggled to keep his mind on the food, serving it onto plates. Then he saw the eyes gleaming at the edge of the shadows beyond the

fire. Frightened for the first time in his life, the huge hostler tried to count the pairs of eyes, but still was not sure of anything save that there were far too many bears surrounding them to fight.

"Show no fear," Josh cautioned him. Then he held his hands up, palms out in a gesture of peace as old as mynkind, showing that he carried no weapons. "Come in, come in," he said, then growled low and made a series of animal noises from far back in his throat.

A deep rumbling answered him and three blood bears came into the firelight while the others remained in the darkness. On all fours they stood taller at the shoulder than Clemmerick's big horse. Their coats were brindled, a dark mustard and the red brown of dried blood. The largest of them was grizzled and nearly snow white around the muzzle. He approached Josh who extended his open palms. The bear sat down in front of him and pressed his heavy paws on top of Josh's palms.

"You speak our tongue," the bear said in coarse Engla.

"You can talk!" Clemmerick exclaimed.

"Yes, ogre, we speak," the bear said, turning his head toward Clemmerick. "Our shamans speak your tongue, for it is given us in the winter dreaming." Then he turned again to Josh. "Why do you follow that company, mage? Are you enemies?"

"Friends. Aejys refused to let us come, but we felt she would have need of us, so we follow, waiting for that moment of need."

The blood bear shaman studied Josh and then Clemmerick. Grymlyken remained invisible. The bear made a snuffling sound and then said, "Pixie, I smell you. Make yourself visible!"

Grymlyken appeared instantly, scrambling up Clemmerick's arm to sit on his shoulder. He regarded the bears distrustfully from his perch.

"I am Grawl, High Shaman of the Blood Bears of the Valley of St. Tarmus."

They spoke long into the night of all the matters pertaining to Aejys' situation. Clemmerick gradually lost his nervousness and grew comfortable with the old bear. Realizing that the three myn were no threat to their shaman, the eyes in the darkness slowly departed.

"I must tell Father Keikero that you are here," Grawl said, "but I will swear him to silence about it."

\* \* \* \*

Aejys heaved a deep contented sigh as she lowered herself into the hot water filling

a large copper and porcelain tub. A small table sat beside it with soap, towels, and washcloth, and an ornately stoppered bottle of rose oil, which the abbot had contributed, from his personal store for his friend's delight.

The heat soothed the aches and pains of travel from her body. A long scar ran down her back from her left shoulder to just below the shoulder blade: the muscle and bone beneath it tended to hurt in the cold weather. She had ripped the muscle and dislocated the shoulder at nineteen when grappling with a stone troll had carried them both over a cliff onto a rocky shelf. Her ma'aram's physicians had done a good job of surgically repairing it, but when the ache flared up nothing helped as much as a hot bath.

The door opened and Tamlestari came in with another bucket of steaming water, closing the door with her foot. "I thought you might need more hot water," the youth said, setting it down beside the tub.

Aejys shook her head. "I have plenty."

"Or someone to wash your back." The youth smiled impishly, snatching up the soap and washcloth.

"Only if you promise not to Read me," Aejys warned with an answering smile.

"I promise." Tamlestari pulled a chair over to the tub, sat down, and soaped up the cloth.

The cloth felt very good on the lapsed paladin's back as the youth's hand moved it skillfully over her. Aejys sighed and closed her eyes, relaxing as she had not in weeks. Then the cloth slid over her shoulder and moved around her left breast, teasing the nipple in a way that sent a shiver of intense pleasure through her. A deep hunger woke in Aejys. She opened her eyes and looked into Tamlestari's bright green ones, their faces so close their noses almost touched. Without thinking Aejys took the youth's face in her hands and kissed her deeply, their tongues twining hungrily. The fully clothed youth slid into the tub onto Aejys' lap. Water overflowed.

Tamlestari shifted and her leg parted the older woman's legs, her hand reached down and stroked the mound of pleasure, her fingers skillfully working their way inside her. Aejys gasped sharply and moaned. She loosened the youth's shirt, pushing it up until she could get her mouth on Tamlestari's small perfect nipple.

Burning heat filled Aejys, rushed along the nerves of her body. Aejys gasped and tried to pull back. "The kyndi," she moaned, struggling to rein in the energy flooding her.

"I've lain with bi-kyndi before," Tamlestari said as she wormed out of her pants. "It's intense."

"You don't understand..." Aejs gasped, trying to fight down the hunger building within her, trying to climb out of the tub, trying to get away from the youth before she did something unforgivable. "I'm not bi-kyndi... I'm not... Oh, god!"

Tamlestari, naked now, grappled with Aejs. Aejs, struggling to get away, overturned the tub. Tamlestari's body slid atop Aejs. Aejs shoved the youth off and scrambled across the drenched floor without rising to her feet.

Tamlestari started toward Aejs, but the older woman put her hand out to stop her.

"You don't understand. I'm not bi-kyndi. The kyndi roused. It roused because ... because ... Oh, dear god! I must be..."

"Pregnant?" Tamlestari folded her legs under her and sat back on her heels. "You didn't know?"

"Hell shitting damnation! I'm no saint! But I'm not a rapist either!" Abruptly tears started in Aejs' eyes, she sat up folding her hands across her abdomen. "Brendorn. We were only together one night. I had been celibate since leaving him and Ladonys."

Tamlestari moved to sit beside Aejs. She touched the lapsed paladin's hand and Aejs jerked back. Tamlestari sighed.

"Estari, I want you. I need you. Understand me. This child would be such a comfort to me if Ladonys were here to womb it. But I'm not going to get you pregnant."

"I love you, Aejs," Tamlestari protested. "I want to have your child."

"Go away!"

"Don't you love me?"

"I love you! Now get out!"

"If you don't kyndi in the first six weeks you endanger yourself and the child!" Tamlestari shouted back at her.

"Get out!" Aejs roared at the top of her lungs.

Tamlestari grabbed up her wet clothes and fled naked down the hall. The brothers stopped in their tracks as she ran past. She burst through the main doors and plunged across the courtyard. Every head went up. Several whistles of admiration sounded. Johannes, emerging from his tent to find out what was going on, almost bumped into her.



"What the hell?" His eyes grew wide as he got a good solid look at the youth's well-shaped flanks and buttocks. "Wonder who found that one in his bed?"

Tamlestari rushed into Aejs' tent, dropped her wet clothes on the ground, and rolled up in Aejs' blankets on the cot.

\* \* \* \*

Tagalong paused at the door to the bathing room. She had just watched Tamlestari streak down the hall from that direction and the dwarf had a suspicion that something had happened between the youth and Aejs. She had been observing the way they looked at each other for a month now. She saw the water seeping under the door and raised one eyebrow quizzically. Then she opened the door and went in.

The room was a mess. She took in the overturned tub and fallen table. Aejs' clothing, both the dirty and the clean lay scattered and sodden upon the floor. Tagalong righted the tub and the table. She glanced about the room and spied Aejs sitting nude in a corner, puffing furiously on her pipe, which had been the only thing not ruined by the water.

"What happened?"

"Get me some dry clothes and I'll tell you." Aejs talked around the pipe stem still held in her mouth.

Tagalong smirked. "Any thing else? Like carry yer apologies to Tamlestari?"

"Tag." Aejs pulled the pipe out and stared down at it for a moment. "Tell Cassana I need to speak with her. Father Keikero will not mind if we use his private library."

"Yer gonna have Cassana carry yer apologies?" Tagalong trundled over and stood looking at Aejs curiously.

"I'm not apologizing, damn it!" Aejs snapped.

"She's just a bit big fer Cassana ta take over her knee and spank, don't ya think?" Tagalong suggested with an innocent air.

Aejs glared in thorough exasperation. "Don't push, Tag. I have a very serious problem, go get me some dry clothes and find Cassana."

Tagalong eyed Aejs for a moment, then nodded, and left.

\* \* \* \*

Father Keikero's private library served also as his study. Tapestries covered the walls behind his large desk and the long couch piled with embroidered pillows.

Three large well-stuffed chairs framed the desk. A small fireplace warmed the cozy room. Bookcases lined one wall that extended into a nook with four freestanding bookcases filling it. Every tapestry, pillow, and piece of furniture in the room had been made by the brothers out of love for the old abbot.

Aejys stared into the fireplace, watching the flames and wondering what to say to Cassana. She really did not have a lot of options. Tamlestari was right about a lack of time, for the longer the ma'aram waited to make the transfer, to kyndi, the harder it was on her physical and psychic body to achieve it. Among her people an unkyndied pregnancy resulted in an azdrin, an androgyne, genderless and sterile. The eldritch genetic patterns of the Sharani gave the child a mix of its three parents with the ma'aramlasah determining the gender. Azdrins could not inherit and compassies were considered questionable. For the purposes of inheritance a child's lineage was counted as passed down through the bloodmother whom the gene readers had established made the most significant contribution to the child's genetic inheritance.

Cassana and Tagalong entered.

"Aejys, you wanted me?" Cassana asked.

Aejys turned from staring into the fireplace and nodded. "I have a problem, Cassana," she said without preamble. "I need you as you once needed Valeda."

Tagalong's eyes sauced. "Omagosh! A baby!"

Cassana smiled quietly. "That's why I saw Tamlestari fleeing naked across the courtyard?"

Aejys sighed. "A back scrub turned into something else. I felt the kyndi stir and chased her off before anything could happen."

"Do you have feelings for her?" Cassana, thinking fondly how much Tamlestari looked like her ma'aram had with her blond roots showing when they left to find the Moonstone of Reyanon.

"I don't know. Sometimes I think I do. Sometimes I think I must just be lonely. She's so like Brendorn."

Cassana slipped her arm around Aejys and gave her a companionable squeeze. "So when shall we take care of your problem?"

"Tomorrow. I need to get used to the idea first."

\* \* \* \*

Hanadi pressed the letter into Aejys' hands. "Feel better now," she said smugly. "My people, we do it right."

Aejys unfolded the document, reading quickly.

Windhawk,

Laeoli is safe, completely unscathed. She turned up two days ago at our meeting place, got lost for a while is all. Just get Aejys here and retrieve her.

Archer

\* \* \* \*

To those who thought all sylvans looked much the same, they did. They shared many features in common: slanted eyes and fair skin, narrow features and full lips, high delicate cheekbones and, most conspicuous of all, pointed ears. But there were racial differences that those who really looked at them could discern. Three races predominated at the monastery: the Valdren, the Eldari, and the Nordrei. The Nordrei were the tallest, a very few were as tall as Aejys. There was a ruddy, pink undertone to their fair skin and their eyes were the most nearly round. Their eyebrows though slanted tended to feather out at the tips. Their hair tended to be shades of brown and black. The Eldari, whom many called elves, had the narrowest, most deeply slanted eyes and their skin was like aged ivory or parchment with a soft yellow cast. They were smaller than the others, almost halflings. Their eyes were all the shades of blue imaginable, from the palest cornflower to the deepest midnight. And their hair ranged from ice white to deep yellow. The Valdren were blondes and redheads; their cheekbones were wide and their faces angular; and, though not as tall as the Nordrei, strongly built – broad through the shoulders and narrow hipped. Those three together with the Fae, also called the Faery, and the winged Jesmyrran, were the royals of the sylvan folk. The Badree Nym came in all colors, shapes and sizes, but as the pariahs of the sylvan peoples, would never be found at the monastery. Even the compassionate Father Keikero would have turned them away; their chaotic immature natures coupled with tremendous magical powers, however well intentioned, always created havoc.

Aejys spotted a single Jesmyrran, rarest of the six races, as he walked along the ambulatory toward the lesser chapel which, out of consideration to the occasional guest, the brothers maintained as a place to pray to the other eight Greater Gods. The eyes of the Jesmyrran slanted upward at the outer corners with a delicate lacework pattern of silken black hairs beneath them and impossibly long lashes. The back of his robe was slit to allow his wings. He inclined his head politely as Aejys passed and she nodded back. She had seen none of the Fae, the most magical of the six, but she felt certain there were some at the monastery.

Perhaps it was something in the stillness that bothered Aejys that first night at the monastery. She had an uneasy feeling, something which she had never experienced on her previous visits. She had set only a light watch out of custom and not because she felt a need. Willodarus took care of this special valley of his and nothing evil had

ever come as far as the monastery, even during the height of the Great War. But she had an itch. So she came to pray before the statue of Aroana in the monastery's lesser chapel.

An assortment of rugs covered the stone floor of the little chapel. In eight niches along the walls stood representations of the other eight of the nine elder gods. Before each stood a small stand with an incense burner, candles and a snuffer. Aeijys lit the candles and incense, then knelt and began the penitent's prayer as she had each night since leaving the Willowhorn Shrine. Her troubled feelings vanished and peace came into mind and body. She breathed deeply of the scented air. Then she prayed for guidance. A soft breeze swept through the room, caressing Aeijys and playing with the smoke from the incense. When she left she felt certain that she would have an answer to the sense of unease that had brought her here to pray rather than in her tent.

\* \* \* \*

"Gather the bears," Josh told the shaman. The air of clarity shrouding the man dispelled all resemblance to the sot's usual self. His clear eyes, though showing the outward signs of his drinking, stared at things the others could not see and he held his head like a proud man who had never been beaten in his life. Clemmerick focused on Josh with intense attention to every word. This was a Josh few besides Clemmerick had ever seen, and certainly not the one regarded with such contempt in Vorgensburg.

"What do you sense?" Grawl asked.

"A change in the winds." He stank of liquor. He had been drinking steadily, not stopping even for a moment since they reached the entrance to the monastery's path. "Something dark has blown here on the winds. It will arrive at midnight. Go swiftly."

Grawl eyed him. The man's voice had changed as if someone else spoke to Grawl, someone who had been known in the winter dreaming. Grawl called into the night and the march began.

Then the mood, the awareness of things beyond himself, and most of all the sense of power and self-possession fled the sot and he was simply Josh again, haunted by his nightmares. Josh huddled down, weeping, clutching his bottle as if it were his last friend, slugging down pull after pull. And then he heaved it up.

Clemmerick knelt beside the sailor, touching him in concern.

Josh began to speak in a small voice, tentative and turning about in its efforts to resist speaking. But the visions had him once more with the drink. "Once there were ... three brothers ... two by darkness chosen and one to darkness forced... Beware the first brother... Beware." He vomited again and lay shivering. Clemmerick dragged him aside, got a basin wedged under his head to catch the spew, and began to clean

him up and wrap him. The ogre did his best by Josh. Grymlyken dug through the packs looking for the medicine.

"Two sisters... Rowan... Three lineages..." Josh began to thrash and scream, nearly upsetting the medicine so that it took all the ogre's massive strength to hold him and the little pixie climbed onto his forehead, along his nose and spilled the bottle into his mouth with a yelp. "Asharan ... Rowan ... Danae." A long howl of desolation swelled out of Josh that raised goose-bumps and the hairs on Clemmerick's arms. "And then there was Abelard. Beware the first brother. Beware the scions of the third. Abelard!" His voice twisted into a shriek. "Abelard!"

"Why does he keep coming back to this?" Grymlyken whimpered, slipping off Josh and retreating from him.

Clemmerick shook his head. "I don't know. It frightens me. I think he's going insane. I think this whole thing was a mistake, but we're too far along to turn back now. We're committed."

\* \* \* \*

When Aejs returned to her tent she found Tamlestari asleep on her cot. Aejs grinned and shook her head, then up-ended the cot. Tamlestari awoke with a start as she hit the ground. The youth glared at Aejs. Aejs laughed and Tamlestari's glower turned to a hot blush.

"Why did you do that?"

Aejs bent, cupped her chin, and kissed her lightly. "Because you don't sleep here yet."

"Yet?" She sounded hopeful and eager.

"We'll talk about it." Aejs gave her a hand up, wrapping a blanket around Tamlestari to cover her nakedness. "Tomorrow," she added when Tamlestari appeared about to start talking.

Tamlestari smiled, caught up the pile of her still wet clothing, and darted back to her own tent.

\* \* \* \*

Aejs dreamed.

Flowers of every color and shape filled a garden to overflowing. She walked down a narrow path laid with broad flagstones. The flowers to her right were all of shades of blue or rich violet, flags and irises and lover's buttons. The other side was a thicket of roses ranging in color from blood red to flaming orange to deep gold. At

the end of the little path stood a tremendous Aroanan willow. Beneath the willow, brushed by its trailing branches, stood a worn stone bench. On the bench sat a figure all in white. The breath caught in her throat, her heart raced and tears started in her eyes. She reached for him, but he raised his hand and stopped her, "Do not touch me," he said, his voice soft and sad, "for I must vanish if you do."

Aejys' mouth tightened. She pressed her hands to the corners of her eyes to blunt the tears. "Brendorn. I have missed you." She sat down on the far end of the bench.

The spirit smiled, his eyes full of wisdom and sorrow. "Willodarus granted me leave to come here to this sacred ground. I cannot stay long. I have come to warn you. Margren has unleashed the harpies and winged demons. They will attack this night. You must rouse your camp and wake the brothers."

Horror and disbelief washed over Aejys. "How?" she gasped. "How does such power come to be Margren's?"

Brendorn's face grew still sadder. "Her lover, the sire of her unborn child, is Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan. Shintar, Prince of Waejontor, was his sire. Aurean the Golden, his paternal grandma'aram, wombed him. He is a sa'necari of unsurpassed power. He called them."

"How can I prove that?"

"You cannot. Now you must wake and warn them all." Brendorn's form began to mist away as he spoke.

"No. Not yet. Don't leave me yet." Aejys, forgetting his admonition in a wave of despair and grief, reached for him. Her fingers passed through him and he dissolved around them.

Aejys started awake, the words still on her lips, "Don't leave me. Please don't leave me..." She stared into the darkness of the tent, her arms aching with the memory of his dying within them. Then the moment was past. Aejys moved quickly. She buckled on her sword, slid her arm through the straps of her shield, and snatched up a horn that lay on the chest at the foot of her bed. She stepped swiftly from the tent, clapped the horn to her lips and blew the Arm and Mount repeatedly.

The camp came alive; soldiers rushed their tents with drawn weapons. Torches flared in the darkness. The birds that nested on the walls rose in a cloud of wings and fled into the night in every direction. Tagalong and Tamlestari reached Aejys almost immediately.

"What is it?" Tagalong shouted, "We under attack? Here?"

Aejys pointed to the sky. The beating of wings could be heard. Myn, seeing her pointing arm, looked up. The sky filled with huge wings, blotting out the moon and

stars. Two groups of creatures bore down on them. Huge, gaunt demons, red-skinned on leathery wings spanning nearly twenty feet with three-toed taloned feet and clawed hands. Among them flew harpies, foul-smelling, feathered creatures, with engorged female breasts and twisted gnarled faces full of hate. The harpies were the swiftest, darting down to strike.

Aejys grabbed Tagalong. "Warn the brothers. Tell them to bar their doors and windows. This isn't something they can fight." Aejys dropped the horn. Then the creatures were upon them.

"Form up!" Aejys' voice broke across the camp, pitched louder than the wings, carrying to every ear. "Fight them in groups. Guard your backs!" The struggle was disintegrating into a confused melee as she watched. Aejys added to herself in a low mutter, "Damn it all! I wish I'd brought pole arms! Those wings make it hard for us to strike at them but easy for them to strike at us!"

She strode out into the thick of it, shield raised and sword ready. "To me!" She shouted, gathering the ragged soldiers into a coherent formation as she fought her way across the courtyard.

As a demon dove at her, her shield came up. It seized her shield and she cut its hands off before it could rise. The tremendous presence of Aejys Rowan, calm and in control, seemingly unafraid, slowly drew the myn together. A shield wall formed. The demons and harpies dove and darted, striking and retreating in a mad dance of death. Now and again a soldier was dragged screaming into the air. There was not enough light for the archers to shoot effectively. In frustration Aejys, reaching the central fire, snagged a flaming brand. She fought her way to the tents closest to the monastery, but still far enough away to not endanger the brothers, and set fire to three tents. As the demons became outlined against the leaping flames, archers in the shadows began to shoot.

\* \* \* \*

Only one person had heard Aejys' muttered wish for pole arms and complaint about the difficulty of reaching the monsters. He stood beside her tent, almost at her elbow, unseen and unnoticed. As she moved out into the melee, he moved back into the shadows, away from the battle and the sight of the struggling soldiers. He lifted CallThunder. Illusion dropped away. No longer a simple pilgrim's walking staff, its dark wood turned completely black with strange carved runes twined about its entire length and inlaid with silver.

At the top a claw grown from the wood itself held a glowing azure orb. The winter mage reached into the upper air with his awareness. He sensed the bitter cold in the uppermost layers of the air, stroked it with a lover's tender caress, and drew it down. At the touch of the freezing air, the warmer layer pressed up to meet it. Thunder rumbled angrily as the power of CallThunder spoke, demanding obedience from the

elements. An icy wind rose up in the high heavens and reached toward the battlements and then the courtyard of the monastery. Eliahu released the cold layer just a little, playing it out and drawing it back like a fisherman with a tremendous struggling fish on the end of a slender easily broken line. If he brought it down too fast the resultant storm would shatter the monastery, destroying every one in it including himself. But worked with care he would steal their assailants one great advantage: flight.

Lightning stabbed across the sky in spears of electric blue and yellow, following the voice of CallThunder: They spoke together to the winds. The thunder of the heavens echoed their summons. The winds slammed across the courtyard now. An uncanny wind that did not reach to the soldiers, but caught the wings of the harpies and demons. The creatures screamed and tried to rise against it. A few reached the upper air only to be crushed into the cliffs that rose above the monastery. Now ice formed in the air currents, gilding the battlements and coating the wings of the creatures. The weight of the ice bore them down into the waiting swords of the soldiers.

A shriek of rage sounded to the mage's left. From the corner of his eye Eliahu saw a demon charge down upon him. He tried to free just enough of his power to call the lightning without losing control of the winds, but the storm bucked and pulled, threatening destruction to all. He dared not let go of even the smallest portion. Then the claws ripped through his robes and back, leaving five long jagged tears in his flesh. Eliahu screamed as he staggered, half blinded by the searing pain. The winds slipped his control as he fell. Hail rained down, striking indiscriminately among the soldiers and their attackers.

The demon struck again to finish him. But this time the terrible claws did not reach the winter mage. A gigantic brindled form rose behind the creature. Furred claws caught and crushed the demon.

"Control it, mage!" A strange guttural voice growled. "Else you kill us all!"

Eliahu looked up into the face of a blood bear, its muzzle snow white with age. He did not question this, for in his own land the snow bears were the companions and champions of his people. He forced his awareness back once more into the winds. The hail withdrew.

The shaman Grawl dropped to all fours and curled protectively around Eliahu. "Release it, send it back into the upper air. You bought us time to get here. My people will make short work of these creatures."

Eliahu nodded. He struggled for consciousness against the growing weakness and terrible pain of his wounds. He separated the layers of air. The thunder quieted. Lightning gave one last flash and moved north, rising away from the monastery. The winds followed it.

"You have done well," the shaman rumbled, lifting the mage onto his broad lap and



cradling him like a small injured child.

Eliahu could feel the warmth of the bear's spirit amid the warmth of his furred limbs. A feeling of peace stole over him. He tried to speak and could not. Darkness claimed him. His head rolled back against the bear's arm and he lay still.

\* \* \* \*

Tagalong crouched and ran, sword in one hand, hammer in the other. She weaved around knots of furiously fighting myn. A handful of the brothers stood before their doors, staring in confusion and horror for in the more than five centuries the monastery had stood nothing of evil had ever before reached their sanctuary. The stout dwarf rushed into the middle of them.

"Back! Inside! You can't fight them! Harpies and demons." She herded them, smacking one on the rump with the flat of her blade and nudging another with a firm shove of her hammer.

A hesitating brother to her left screamed. Tagalong spun on her heel. A harpy stood there, biting deeply into the now headless Eldari. Strips of bloody flesh hung from the creature's mouth. It sucked them in and took another bite of the Eldari. The twisted hag's face regarded her as it ate, the red eyes glowing with hate and hunger. A long mane of matted dirty yellow hair hung to its waist. Long taloned hands gripped its prey. Drooping emaciated breasts hung from its chest. Feathered wings extended from its back and from the waist down it was feathered and taloned like a hellish bird of prey.

Bile rose into Tagalong's throat at the sight and she felt as if a great weight had slammed into her stomach as all the nightmares of the Great War came rushing back at her. She had never seen one before, but she believed it was creatures like that which had attacked her oldest brother's smithy in the Iradrim Mountains and murdered him and his family. Rage seized her.

Tagalong shouted for the others to run. She whirled the hammer twice and released it. It struck the harpy in the head, stunning it. The dwarf leaped on the creature instantly. She shoved the sword into its body with a twist and a jerk. The claws dug into her legs, tearing through her boots. Tagalong screamed in fury and pain, stabbing again and again with her sword. Abruptly the creature lay still. She spied her hammer and started to climb off the corpse to retrieve it.

Claws closed on her shoulders from behind, piercing the sturdy mail in three places. Tagalong looked up into the grotesque face of a leering demon. She shifted her grip on the sword, striking behind her at hip level. The demon shrieked and threw her against a wall. The sword went spinning from her grasp. Tagalong struck hard and slid down, the wind knocked from her body. She rose on her hands and knees, crawling dazedly toward her hammer. The demon bent over her snarling. She could smell its breath now. It stank of sulfur and brimstone. Tagalong threw herself

sideways and rolled. Her hand closed on her hammer and she came up instantly onto her feet. The claws grabbed at her. The hammer connected with the nearest one, shattering bones. The demon screamed. Tagalong backed up. Her shoulder bumped the wall. She put her back to it and assumed a spread-legged stance to put more power into the next blow.

A tremendous roar shattered the air behind the attacking demon. A blood bear rose behind it in fighting stance, twelve feet at the shoulder. Tagalong's eyes widened and she gasped: She had forgotten how huge they looked when they stood on their hind legs. Claws that could slice six inches into the hardest wood on the first stroke ripped the left arm off the demon. The creature beat its wings and tried to rise. The blood bear's fangs bit into the demon's leg, dragging it back. While it shrieked and twisted, the bear methodically tore it apart like a child destroying a doll.

"Score one for the bears," Tagalong muttered. The dwarf ducked aside, scooped up her sword, and wiped it on her pants leg. "Aejys. Gotta find Aejys."

\* \* \* \*

Josh wept and twisted in Clemmerick's arms like an uneasy child in the grip of fevered dreams, following the paths of Eliahu's power. He felt as if he pulled the layers of air together and called the lightning down. Power exulted through his veins and he sang with it. This was how it should have been. Untrained, untaught, unlettered ... and yet he recognized it, knew the taste of it like fire on his tongue. Then the demon struck Eliahu and Josh woke screaming, his fingers digging into the fabric of Clemmerick's shirt. The ogre pulled the blanket up around him to keep him warm and held him like a child, his head against Josh's, waiting out the panic. Only when the storm had departed did Josh finally sleep again. This time he did not dream.

\* \* \* \*

There was one they did not see. Because he had no wings Eliahu's storm did not hinder him. He crouched on the battlement, watching the struggle. The archer knew he would not leave here alive when he volunteered for a chance to slay the Lion of Rowanslea, one of the most hated leaders of the Sharani who had torn apart his homeland. He held a yew bow. There were only three arrows in his quiver. One of those arrows alone was enough to bring down a dragon. It had taken his master, Mephistis Coleth, a year to forge each of the points, which bore a special rune. No armor could turn them. Nothing could survive them. He spied his target almost immediately, but in the melee he could not get a clear shot. So he waited.

\* \* \* \*

Cassana stood beside Aejys as the fighting died down. She looked up at the last flash of lightning as Eliahu released the storm. In that brilliant light she saw the archer on the walls. A bright flash like an eye of blood shone as he nocked the first arrow

to the string. Cassana cried out a warning, sensing that the target was Aejs. She leaped forward, shoving her friend out of the way. Her body jerked at the impact as the first one caught her in the chest.

"Get down," Cassana gasped, shoving Aejs to her knees. She stepped into the path of the second arrow, which ripped, through her lung. The Odaren was already falling as the archer, hoping to drive the arrow through both Cassana and the one she shielded, sent his last shot into her stomach.

Aejs twisted away from Cassana. She got to her feet in time to catch Cassana by the shoulders as she crumpled. "What the hell?" She felt her friend's body jerk and stared as the point of the last arrow came through her back.

"Archer! On the wall!" Aejs shouted. "Someone catch that cockwhore!"

Tamlestari took Cassana from Aejs and lowered her gently to the ground. Aejs strode off toward the wall, noting with satisfaction that Brundarad had reached it ahead of the rest: nothing escaped the shadow hound. Then she turned back to Tamlestari.

The youth recognized the nature of the arrows immediately. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket, wrapped it around the protruding point and broke it off, careful not to let it touch her skin for the smallest scratch would mean an agonizing death.

Aejs knelt beside Cassana. She lay in her niece's arms, the purple stain of pollendine on her lips and around her nostrils. Tamlestari looked up, pale and shaken. "Mei amita's dying. Dawn is so close and she will not see it." She sounded lost and sad. The youth held up one of the arrows she had taken from her amita's body.

Aejs saw the death rune incised on its surface: an arrow that always killed. "Sa'necari," she hissed. Nothing less would have pierced the Iradrim-forged kenda'ryl rings of the Odaren's mail. Aejs knew there would be no other points like these among all the rest found on that field of slaughter: they had been meant for her, but had slain Cassana instead.

"Aejs," Cassana stirred weakly in Tamlestari's arms, "speak to ... you ... alone."

Tamlestari raised her head, frowning. "Mei Amita?"

"Alone."

"It's all right, Tamlestari," Aejs told her. "You go sit by that big oak for a moment." The lapsed paladin took her cloak from her shoulders and folded it beneath Cassana's head.

Tamlestari left reluctantly.

"She's in love ... with you," Cassana said, her voice soft and weak. A thin line of blood dribbled from the corner of her mouth mixing with the violet of the pollendine.

Aejys glancing at the lithe young Sharani. "I know."

"Have you..." Cassana broke off coughing, the dribble of blood became a stream, "any feelings ... for her?"

"Yes, my friend, I love her," Aejys said, realizing with sudden unfoldment that she did indeed love the mercurial young hoyden intensely.

"Let her carry your child," Cassana's voice slid to a whisper. "Promise me..."

"I promise."

She closed her eyes and lay back, accepting now the shadows that came for her. A last breath shuddered through Cassana Odaren and she passed from this life.

Aejys kissed her forehead, cheeks, and lips in farewell. The lapsed paladin gathered Cassana into her arms and held her tight, pressing her face into the heavy hair of her slain friend. She felt as if the world had just careened to a stop, jolting her stomach with the impact. A hollow ache began in her chest, accompanied by a tightness in her throat. Her lips thinned into a grim line. She wanted to scream, but it stayed locked in her throat. Aejys remembered that night on the bluffs at Brendorn's grave; the way Cassana had pulled her from her brooding. A deep simmering anger built inside her that was far different from her occasional flaring of temper, and she knew that it would never leave. This was a war and by running away Aejys had given Margren time to prepare it. If she had stayed and faced the situation seven years ago, Cassana and Brendorn would probably still be alive.

She wondered what terrible thing she had done in her life to deserve the ugly turns it kept taking. If she knew how she had brought this down on herself to begin with then she could make peace with her fate, but for the life of her she could not think of anything. What had she done wrong, witting or unwitting, that had engendered such hatred in Margren's heart as to bring them to this pass? What in Haven's name could I have done different? Where did I go wrong with Margren? God help me! What could I have done different that would have spared Cassana and Brendorn? What!

A gentle hand touched her shoulder and she looked up to see that Tamlestari had returned unbidden. "I'm sorry, loyal heart, she's gone," Aejys said softly, her voice catching on the words.

A broken cry came from the youth. She dropped to her knees, dragging Cassana's body from Aejys' arms. "Mei amita," the youth wept quietly, "mei amita."

Aejys squeezed Tamlestari's shoulders, pressing her cheek briefly to her hair. "You are not alone." Then she went back into her tent and returned with a blanket. Tamlestari nodded numbly as Aejys wrapped Cassana and rose with the slain Sharani noble in her arms. Tamlestari followed close. Aejys crossed the courtyard. Smoke billowed from two burning tents. The night wind caught it and blew it across them, stinging their eyes. Several soldiers beat at the flames while others dragged water from the well to throw on it. Already the brothers were out, moving the wounded and the dead from the battleground, the former to the infirmary, and the latter to the chapel. Several people started to speak to Aejys, but caught the look in her eye and let her pass unhindered.

The tall doors to the chapel stood open. Aejys stepped inside and looked about. The brothers were laying the dead reverently on the pews and covering them.

"Let us have her," a gentle voice spoke at Aejys' elbow. Father Keikero had seen and followed her in. Two brothers stood beside him, waiting.

Aejys hesitated.

"Please, Aejys, my friend," Keikero said. "Your myn need you. She is past needing what you can give."

Aejys heaved a long, heavy sigh and let them take Cassana's body from her.

Keikero slipped his arm around Tamlestari. "Come with me, my child," he said, leading her to a pew.

Aejys watched for a moment, and then turned on her heel. As she started across the courtyard Tagalong rushed up breathless. "They caught the cockwhore killed Sana," Tagalong said in a rush. "And yer not gonna like this."

"Like what? What did you do to him?"

"Not to him, what he is."

Aejys stopped in her tracks, "What?"

"He's sa'necari."

Anger blazed up in Aejys' eyes. "Margren's sleeping with the enemy," she snarled and spat on the ground.

\* \* \* \*

The sa'necari archer stood with his arms wrapped around a tree and tied behind him. One arm bled heavily where Brundarad had bitten a chunk from it. His face was savage as he spit curses at his captors. His narrow eyes slanted in, not out like the

sylvans, and glowed like deep violet fires with neither pupil, nor iris, nor whites. His mouth bled from being struck. Johannes stood before him, his huge hand raised to hit him again.

"No!" Aeijys said, the crowd making a path for her. "He'll never talk." Her words were calm, her face like ice, her eyes burning with a cold, controlled rage so intense no one could meet her glance.

"I could make him, Aeijstrys Rowan," Hanadi said, quietly appearing at her side. She was Euzadi by birth and rearing: the nomads dealt harshly with their enemies, torture being a favorite pastime to play with captives. When her guildsmyn training warred with her upbringing, the latter usually won out.

"No. The Brothers would never countenance torture, not even of an enemy." She motioned Johannes aside.

Hanadi shrugged. "We could take him with us, torture him outside this valley."

"No. That would let Margren track us even more easily than she does now. They've probably got a link in his mind."

Johannes moved aside as Aeijys approached, almost wincing at her gaze.

Aeijys simply stared at the assassin a moment, remembering how Cassana died. The Waejontori spit in her face. She wiped it calmly on her shirtsleeve, and drew her dagger as he started to scream curses and imprecations. Aeijys grabbed his tongue and cut it out. "No reason to trouble the Brothers with your noises," she said with such chill matter-of-factness that even Tagalong shivered. In more than thirty years she had only once seen Aeijys like this: when she'd captured the Waejontori general who had butchered the people of Shaurone's West Temple.

Aeijys slit his clothing open, then shoved her dagger in just above his crotch and ripped up savagely all the way to his breast bone. His entrails spilled around her hand as she worked the blade up. She draped them around his neck, stuffed them in his mouth. Then she wiped her dagger clean on his shirt and walked off without speaking or replying to anyone around her.

Hanadi cocked her head, staring after her. "Too bad the Guild can't hire her," she whispered softly to Brundarad. Then, because her God, Hadjys the Dark Judge did not believe in torture of the flesh, she went to the Waejontori and gave him the stroke of mercy through his heart.

\* \* \* \*

The courtyard was thick with blood bears as Aeijys approached the main building, intending to rejoin Tamlestari beside Cassana's body. Brothers moved around her, finding and carrying the wounded inside. A slender Eldari brother extended his hand

to attract her attention.

Aejys paused. "What is it?"

"Eli needs you," the brother said softly. "Come with me."

Aejys nodded and followed him into the sanctuary. She started to turn toward the infirmary as they entered the ambulatory that linked the sanctuary to the other buildings. The brother touched her arm lightly and shook his head. "This way."

He led her down a hall that she had never been down before.

"Why isn't he with the others?" Aejys asked and feared the answer.

"Please, do not ask. Just come."

Worry creased the lapsed paladin's face. He's dying. That must be why they have placed him away from the others. It must be. My friend – two friends in one night.

The brother halted at a door and opened it. Aejys stepped in. The door closed behind her.

Eliahu lay on his side, his face pale and drawn, the glaze of pain and exhaustion in his eyes. A brother sat on a chair drawn up to the far side of the bed, bathing and bandaging Eliahu's back. Grawl curled at the foot, watching.

Aejys pulled another chair up and sat down beside him. His hand was curled around his staff. "How bad—" she started to ask and her words trailed off as her eyes took in the staff. Eliahu was too weak yet to restore the illusion. CallThunder lay beside him in full glory. She knew then who had called the storm that forced the demons and harpies within reach of their blades.

"Who are you?" she asked gently.

Eliahu tried to smile, but it emerged as a grimace, the lines of pain deepening in his pale face. "Eliahu Solistis," he gritted out low, "High Mage of Winter. Lord of the Iron Glacier." He closed his eyes, slipping into a drugged slumber.

Aejys gently brushed back a strand of long yellow hair that had slipped across his face. She felt grateful that it was not the approach of death, but a secret, that had brought him to a room apart. She lifted her eyes to the brother working on his wounds. "How bad is he?"

"His back is a mess. The flesh hangs in tatters from his shoulders to his hips. Two ribs are broken, another is cracked," the brother pronounced solemnly, then allowed a reassuring smile, "but he will live."

"Let me speak for him," Grawl sat up. "I am Grawl, High Shaman of the blood bears of St. Tarmus."

Aejys' eyes widened in surprise, for she had not known the bears could speak. "As you will," she replied.

"Your mage wishes to remain your secret weapon against the darkness." Grawl related all of Eliahu's reasons for the deception, leaving out the fact that he had gotten his information, not from the mage himself, but from Josh.

\* \* \* \*

Aejys returned to her tent in the mid-morning, having not slept since before the battle. She found Tamlestari's medicine satchel, but no other sign that the youth had been there. She returned to the courtyard and saw Tagalong.

"Tag! Have you seen Tamlestari?"

"The girl's takin' it hard, Aejys. Real hard," Tagalong admitted. "They've put the dead in the chapel ta pray over them. That's where you'll find her. She just sits there weeping."

"She needs me."

Tagalong gave Aejys an odd, thoughtful look. "Ya know, way she looks at yuh I'd say she's got it bad."

"I know. Now come on." Aejys started for the door with Tagalong following.

Gwyndar and Emrindi, cantering around the north end of the sanctuary, spied Aejys and broke into an easy lope toward her. Ajandar was not with them as he would have been in earlier days: Aejys knew the missing wynderjyn had either gone feral or killed himself at Cassana's death. Her sadness returned thinking of the proud animal. At least if he had gone feral, the Valley of St. Tarmus was a good place for him.

"Ajandar?"

"No one knows," Tagalong said, "unless it's Tamlestari."

Aejys paused, rubbing the back of her hand across her eyes. The lapsed paladin wanted to know. If the wynderjyn had died he should be buried with his master. But Aejys did not want to ask Tamlestari. The youth was new to grief, having been too young when her ma'aram died to remember that loss. Aejys felt reluctant to remind her of her fresh loss any more than she could avoid.

Gwyndar nuzzled Aejys. He blew in her ear. She caught him by the ears, pulled his face around, and kissed him on his broad nose. He pleaded with her to mount.



"Not this time, my friend. I want to walk."

\* \* \* \*

The dead lay on the benches nearest the altar, their bodies bathed, their hair dressed and combed out. The hilts of their naked swords rested in their folded hands. They had been laid out with all honors the brothers could give. Mourners stood or knelt or sat upon the floor around their lost friends and companions.

Jaqui of Treth, her usually cocky expression replaced by utter seriousness, her eyes distant, leaned upon her spear just beyond the doors. A slender shaft of sunlight from a high window played across a long untended slash in Jaqui's upper right arm.

"Have you had that looked at?" Aejs asked.

Jaqui smiled and shrugged. "It won't scar and it'll be gone tomorrow."

Aejys' eyebrow quirked. "Oh?"

"It's a charm cast by an old lover. She loved my 'chocolate candy skin' and didn't want it blemished. No matter how bad the wound, it heals quickly and never leaves a scar."

"Ria Torrundarsdottir?" Another name of the dead. Aejs shivered, the touch of something chill wrapped around her and she felt as if the ghosts of lost friends were watching her.

"Yeah." A shadow gathered around Jaqui's mouth and in the corners of her large dark eyes; she banished it with another shrug. "We all got our scars, just some of us wear them on the inside."

"And some of us wear them in both places," Aejs replied.

"Yeah. That too." Jaqui inclined her head at Tamlestari who knelt beside Cassana with her forehead pressed into the silken coverlet of the bier. "Stay with her. I been following her around all day just to be sure she didn't do something stupid. I got someone waiting for me."

"How is Briarmottë?"

Jaqui grinned. "He got himself a couple of cuts. Nothing much you understand, but I'm the only one's going to change those bandages. You understand?"

"Go on."

Aejys did not notice when Tagalong discretely slipped away to take care of other

business. In the silence she could hear Tamlestari's muffled weeping. Aejs' hand settled lightly on Tamlestari's shoulder as she knelt beside her.

Tamlestari looked up, her eyes red and swollen from long weeping. "Mei Amita said she heard his voice. She couldn't wait much longer. Had to go to him."

"Colin."

Tamlestari nodded through her tears. "It was the last thing she said to me. Before you came."

Aejs kissed Cassana's forehead, cheeks, and lips. "She told me," she said with a catch in her voice, "that night on the bluffs at Brendorn's grave. She said she was placing her life between me and Margren." She clasped Tamlestari to her, "Come away. She is in Aroana's care now."

Tamlestari pulled three arrowheads from her pocket, holding them by their bits of broken shaft as she got to her feet. She handled them almost casually, yet with the respect one gave a venomous snake: she did not let her bare fingers touch the points themselves. "I'll return these to Ajan Margrenan," she said darkly, "on the sticking end of new shafts."

Aejs' stomach tightened, then did a slow roll at the sight of the death runes on the arrowheads; the same rune the sa'necari used on their baneblades. The blades that had left the criss-cross scars on her legs and right shoulder; that had almost made a slave banelich of her. She sucked in a deep breath, forcing the tension out of her stomach.

The lapsed paladin cupped Tamlestari's chin, lifting her face up, studying it. Aejs saw there a terrible rage hungering for blood vengeance. She saw too a grief-stricken youth full of anguish; loss gnawed at Tamlestari. Cassana had filled the place in Tamlestari's heart that had been left abandoned by Kalestari's death; it was as if she had lost her ma'aram a second time. There is nothing in my vow that says I must protect Margren from her own earned fate, Aejs mused silently. I do not believe I could successfully step between this young predator and her prey even if my life depended on it. But they are both predators and what may happen to one may as easily happen to the other. "Loyal heart, walk with me for a while. We'll walk down into the valley. Its beauty will soothe your grief."

Aejs bent and kissed her forehead. Tamlestari's expression transformed in a blink. She wiped her tears with two fingers of her right hand and, with an uncertain smile, turned her thoughts to wonder. "You are certain you want me to? Yesterday, in the bath..."

"You would not have me walk alone, would you?"

"Never! I will walk with you."

They walked among the trees and settled on a small smooth shelf above a brook. Aejs remembered with a pang that the last time she had walked along a brook with someone she cared for it had been with Brendorn and they had made love. Rushes grew along the bank amid the long spiky magenta blooms of dragonstail. A million tiny outcroppings of blue streaked stones islanded the swift shallow waters.

"I have always wondered," said Aejs, "if the ocean would look like this from the clouds."

Tamlestari nestled against her. "If it does, then I will always wish I had wings."

They talked until the sun zenithed. Aejs held her and filled her thoughts with stories of Brendorn and Cassana and of Kalestari, her ma'aram. She felt the sweet warmth of the young girl and kissed her head. Tamlestari snuggled closer, her face now pressing Aejs' breast. Aejs sighed, trembling suddenly in a very special need and loneliness.

Tamlestari rose up a little on her knees, her hand pressing the back of Aejs' neck as her lips met those of the lapsed paladin. Tired and care-worn Tamlestari's shields slipped away in the eager warmth. Her Reader's talent revealed to her the intensity of the passion Aejs held in check and the purity of the love she felt for Tamlestari. Then another presence impinged on her awareness, floating in contentment until Tamlestari touched it.

The youth drew back, her eyes searching Aejs' face. The longer they waited the harder it would become to move the child from Aejs' body to her own. While a wide variation existed within the manifestations of the kyndi, there were also boundaries and borders it did not cross, exceptions it did not make. As a Reader and healer, Tamlestari knew that only too well. "I want your child."

"Tamlestari, loyal heart..."

"Shhh," Tamlestari hissed. She lifted Aejs' tunic and shoved her hand down Aejs' pants. Her palm and widespread fingers lay for a moment flat on the lapsed paladin's stomach.

"What is wrong?"

"Not wrong. Right," Tamlestari said so softly that Aejs could barely hear her and had to listen very closely. "You must kyndi very soon." She pulled her hand back and kissed it.

Aejs tried to turn her head aside and not look at Tamlestari, but the youth would have none of that, catching the older woman by the chin and gently yet firmly bringing her gaze back. "We were only together for a day and a night..." Aejs shook her head, "We did not want Laeoli to be an only child. We tried hard for

another. I would have carried one for Ladonys if ... but neither of us..." Aejs pressed her hands over her face, sighing into them. "Why now? With death all around me?"

"Sometimes that is enough," replied Tamlestari. She slithered out of her tunic, lifting her young perfect breasts to Aejs' lips. "Make love to me, beloved. Give me your child."

"You're so young..."

"I am not a virgin to either male or female. So don't let that bother you. And there are no others. Mei Amita would have taken it, but she's dead. Ladonys is far away and too ill from her wounds to take it. You don't want to give it to strangers. Compassies, even of noble birth, are treated shamefully. If you wait until we reach Shaurone the kyndi could kill you making the transfer or cripple the child."

"Loyal heart." She caressed Tamlestari's hair with her lips. "I love you. I promised Cassana that you would have this child. But there is so much to consider..." She picked up Tamlestari's tunic and tried to pull it back over the youth's head. Tamlestari squirmed away and with a deft twist sprawled the older warrior on her back.

"Woof!" Aejs exhaled sharply as she landed.

Tamlestari pressed her body down on Aejs, her sweet soft breasts in the lapsed paladin's face. Aejs closed her eyes, fighting a wave of such longing that her whole body seemed to ache. She could smell the fragrance of the youth's skin; feel the delicious softness of Tamlestari's breasts. Her lips hungered to frame the sweet rosebud nipples centered on the milk white breasts. They made a study in contrast, Aejs so very dark and Tamlestari sylvan pale.

Tamlestari's hands moved up beneath Aejs' shirt. The older woman shuddered as the young hands found her breasts, massaging her nipples.

It would be so easy to lift the youth away. So why was it so hard? She could feel the kyndi already rousing in the center of her being. Would it really be so wrong to pass her child to Tamlestari? Would it be wrong to give in to the fullest expression of her love?

The soft, wind-whisper voice that had slid through her consciousness at the stream following her encounter with Johannes murmured in her mind. Let go, my paladin. Let love be, let life be. Let there always be life before death. Before loss. My blessing is in this.

A great sensation of rightness and clarity flooded Aejs, sweeping doubt from her. Aejs cupped Tamlestari's breasts. Her lips closed on Tamlestari's left nipple sucking and tonguing it. The kyndi burned through her veins and pooled in her loins.

Aejys rolled over, bearing Tamlestari back. Her knee parted the younger woman's legs. Her hand slid down into the youth's pants to fondle the pubic lips, reaching into the moist wet womanness. Tamlestari moaned beneath her, fumbling with her clothing. Soon they were both unclad on the grassy knoll, their bodies writhing together.

The tension built in Aejys until she felt she would explode. The kyndi materialized, throbbed almost with a life of its own, a golden translucent appendage composed entirely of energy – the most common form in which it manifested. At first the kyndi hummed softly, a pleasant vibration that grew swiftly hot and hungrily throbbing. The kyndi demanded to sheath itself in the moist warm folds of Tamlestari to expend its gift. It burned through Aejys' body, tingled in the cells of her flesh, and carried her on a flaming wind of passion beyond thought. The instrument of its expression grew hard and solid. In an instant little remained of Aejys' conscious awareness save the hunger of the kyndi.

The touch of the kyndi against her inner thigh brought a moan of intense pleasure from Tamlestari. She opened her legs wider, wrapping them around Aejys as she would have a male. The hunger of the kyndi became the hunger of Tamlestari. It burned against her inner thighs and the lips of her vagina without marking the skin, felt hard and solid as a cock although it was made of energy and not flesh. Her hand grasped it and the taste of the power heightened as Tamlestari guided it that first little ways inside her. They had crossed the gates and the kyndi would allow no going back now.

The kyndi entered Tamlestari fully, reaching for her womb to place its gift where it could grow in safety. Aejys' pelvis moved rhythmically against Tamlestari's womanhood, spreading her thighs wider and wider with her hands, rearing back to go deeper and deeper. The kyndi's warm hardness touched the seat of Tamlestari's passion, sending its magic burning through the very fiber of the youth's being. She writhed, moaning uncontrollably, as the kyndi cut like an ethereal sword blade through the private parts of her body and her soul. Tamlestari exploded in impassioned weeping as sensation crescendoed within her body and spirit. Orgasm overwhelmed them both as part of Aejys flowed into Tamlestari, nestled in her womb and the kyndi left them, its energy expended.

As they lay on the soft earth exhausted, Tamlestari's awareness could sense the first changes in her body. She felt slightly nauseous and dizzy. She knew from Reading pregnancies that the first one was usually hardest among her people. Tamlestari pressed her hands across her stomach. "You have given me Brendorn's child, your child," she said softly, an odd tone to her voice.

"Our child, loyal heart," Aejys sat up, drawing Tamlestari into her arms. "I pray Aroana, that you will not regret loving me."

Tamlestari laughed and shook her black-tipped locks, looking once more like the

young hoyden who had gobbled pastries in Aejs' sitting room. "You mean regret letting you get me pregnant?" Tamlestari pulled away just enough to look full into Aejs' face, "Or are you thinking about Margren?"

Aejys fumbled in her discarded clothing for her pipe. She smoked for a while, reluctant to answer that question. "I marched from darkness into darkness and then I ran away..."

"No. You did not run away. You made a strategic retreat. Didn't you do that a couple of times during the Great War?"

"I was not talking about the War."

"I know that. Now you have given a third reason I am supposed to regret you. Which one did you mean?"

"I don't know." Aejs relit her pipe and fell silent for a while. Tamlestari waited patiently for an answer. "Maybe all of them. I never let myself brood before and now I cannot seem to stop."

"You cannot leave me behind if I don't allow it. I am far more stubborn than Ladonys and Brendorn." Tamlestari's mouth curved briefly into a pout that was meant to seem ferocious, but failed utterly. "When I read your wounds I looked no farther than that and it was too early to be easily noticeable. I have experienced the bi-kyndi. I took my first lover at eleven. At fourteen a friend's brother came to spend harvest week with her at the school. Three friends and I took him on a picnic ... every day for a week." Smug satisfaction came into Tamlestari's voice and a mischievous light in her green eyes. "We sent him home exhausted. He wept when I climbed him that last night," she laughed, "begged me to let him sleep. But I didn't."

Aejys smiled at the image, remembering how she and Ladonys had kept Brendorn sleepless during the first months of their triading. But she could not let herself enjoy it, for her conscience still nagged her. "Forgive me," Aejs said again. "I cannot lie to you or to myself, loyal heart. I may simply be going back to die. You could find yourself raising this child alone."

"I am not afraid. I can go back to Vorgensburg with Tag. Or to my ma'aramlasah who is Mar'ajan of Yarrendar."

"Yes, there is that. And we will tell Laurelyanne," Aejs said softly. "She should know that she will have another grandchild. It will comfort her when I tell her how her son died."

"No one else. If Margren knew, she would try to kill me." Tamlestari's slender fingers traced the multitude of scars on her lover's body: It seemed as if there were more scars than unmarked flesh. "Margren does not frighten me now. But I will choose the battleground, not Margren." She stroked the older woman's scarred left

breast, slowly approaching the nipple again. "I love you, Aejs Rowan."

"And I you, more than I ever dreamed possible." Aejs rolled onto her side, raised herself up on her elbow, and bent over the girl. "Pity the kyndi will not rouse again until the child is delivered. At least I cannot rouse it, though I hear some can."

"The bi-kyndi raise it at will with either gender. But there will be other times after this child is born," Tamlestari said with surprising smugness. "I want a large family."

\* \* \* \*

"The demons will not catch us unawares again," Father Keikero told Aejs as they left the infirmary where she had been visiting her wounded.

"They came for me," Aejs said. "I doubt you will be in danger once I leave."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not," Keikero said. "Still, when you come this way again, we will be secure. I spoke to my God and in a week's time there will be blue gryphons nesting in the caves above the monastery."

"Blues!" Aejs was impressed, "I have never seen one. Gryphons, yes. But Blues? No."

They were the rarest gryphons. According to legend, one day the God Willodarus was walking across the great plains of Murshahdi. He lay down to take a nap during the hottest part of the day. As he slept the angle of the westering sun changed until it glared full in his face. A blue gryphon flying past alighted and shielded him from the harsh sun with her wings. The grateful god put his mark upon them: a green crest atop their white-feathered heads and the gift of speech with all creatures.

Anything the blood bears and mountain lions could not handle, the gryphons certainly could.

"Then I am welcome to return?" Aejs asked.

"Tut! Tut! What a question! Of course, old friend, you are always welcome here. The faithful of Willodarus do not yield to the threats of darkness!"

\* \* \* \*

Aejs remained four more days among the brothers. Most of the wounded remained behind. Those who were only lightly injured or simply stubborn, such as Eliahu, rode on with the company.

Clemmerick and his companions retreated into the trees as Aejs' company emerged from the stone path and took the other fork. When the company had disappeared down the trail, the ogre emerged and stared down it.

"I'm coming with you," growled a low guttural voice. Clemmerick turned to see the snow-white muzzle of Grawl poking from beneath a pine tree. The huge blood bear emerged into the light. The straps of two medicinal satchels crossed his chest and a backpack rested between his shoulder blades.

"I invited him," Josh said, turning over in his blankets on the platform suspended from the side of the big horse.

Clemmerick frowned. "When?"

"First night."

"I didn't hear you."

"We weren't speaking common."

Clemmerick sighed. He picked up the trailing lead rope of his horse and shrugged. "Welcome to our company, Grawl." Clemmerick was an unusually patient person, but he was beginning to feel both tired and itchy for a break in the monotony of the march. He wished he could have been there for the battle with the demons.

"Are you Abelard?" Josh asked. "Because, if you are, I don't want you to come."

Grawl laughed. "No. I assure you again, young mon. I am not Abelard."

Clemmerick stared at Josh, wondering what made the bear call Josh young, for Josh looked forty at least.

\* \* \* \*

Isranon felt Rose stir in his bed and ran his hands over her smooth body. Having her there felt so very right. Dane's people had begun bringing her to him each night and retrieving her the next day. He had gradually begun to feel safe with her. Rose opened her eyes at his touch and arched her body, rubbing her nipples across his chest while making suggestive movements with her pelvis. Thanks to Dane's intervention, no one but he was allowed to touch Rose any longer. Isranon licked her neck and ran his fingers along the inside of her thigh, letting her wonder which he would decide on first, making the anticipation sharp inside her.

He had awakened hard and eager, his needs as intense as his youth. The pressure in his swollen cock made him desperate to get inside her, but he held himself back. Rose wrapped her legs around his buttocks, which did not help his restraint. He wanted her to enjoy it as much as he did. His fingers found their way inside her, his thumb massaging the knob of her clit. Rose moaned. When she became wet enough to accept him without discomfort, Isranon entered with a slow, satisfying movement that pleased both of them. His thrusts deepened steadily until finally he exploded



inside her and dropped onto his side, rolling away from her.

Rose immediately nestled closer. Isranon nuzzled her neck. His awareness swept into her mind, coloring it with rainbows. He was learning to give her pleasure there too as he fed. Isranon had begun to embrace more fully the aspects of his powers as sa'necari because of his desire to give her pleasure and his desire to protect her. He would still not cross the line, but he would do small things. Rose gave a small gasp of pain when his fangs entered, that never seemed to change, then moaned softly as if caught in a fresh orgasm as Isranon fed.

## CHAPTER NINE. DRAWN SWORDS AT DAWN

On the night of the autumn equinox, the same day that Laeoli's body washed up on the shores of the Arris River, Ladonys died. For weeks she had been getting stronger and then suddenly she was gone. Sonden sat by her bedside, staring long at her face as lividity set in. He held her chill wrist in his hands, searching again through her dead body for what had killed her, but still could not find it.

Sonden laid her wrist beside her, drawing the coverlet over her face again. He could hear Maranya weeping in the far corner. Sonden forced himself to breath deeply, steadying himself, and then he met Soren's eyes. "They killed her," he said, "but by my God, I cannot find how they did it." Are our enemies within the temples themselves? he asked himself, feeling deeply chilled by the thoughts. He remembered the strange death of Laeoli's wynderjyn, how not even the barns in the lower valleys near the sacred high meadows seemed safe any longer. Was there any safety left anywhere in the realm? He decided then that he would bring his readers and mages together, read them himself to confirm both their humanity and loyalty, and then begin a systematic search through the temples for spies, traitors and shifters. However they were reaching out to murder people and creatures, he would find them and stop them.

"Then they will kill us all," Soren replied, looking to her sobbing grandchild.

Sonden followed her gaze. "No. I will not allow that."

"How, Most Holy Lord, can you prevent it? They will worry that Ladonys told us things ... whatever they can imagine that makes us a threat."

"There is one place in all the realm that even they cannot reach. At dawn I'm sending you all with an escort to the High Meadows. It's a rough place to spend the winter..." he tried to smile, failing miserably. "You'll all be safe there. The ground is too holy and warded even for them..."

Soren nodded thoughtfully. "We'll be ready to ride."

\* \* \* \*

Dane accompanied Mephistis onto the bluffs where the prince had horses waiting. Five sa'necari and ten guardsmyn waited there. Mephistis was keeping rendezvous with some of his Sharani allies, whom he did not wish to become aware of his citadel beneath Dragonshead. Many things could go wrong in Mephistis' absence. Sa'necari ruled as much by power as by allegiances which could prove as unsubstantial as a wraith of dreams.

"You should take Isranon with you."

"I have no desire to expose him to these converts of mine," Mephistis replied, taking the reins in hand and mounting his horse. "Nor they to him. I need to feel them out further without distractions such as Isranon produces. Several of them are Sharani males who do not appreciate the females holding all the power in these lands. They must see how powerful we are, and united. Isranon is neither of those. Of course, those who are already completely changed by the rites no longer have a choice in aiding me. Should the Sharani discover what they have become, they would burn them alive. But there are others to be influenced."

"It is not Isranon who causes those distractions," Dane protested.

Mephistis disregarded that. "Margren has promised to leave him alone in my absence. I leave it to you to keep him alive should anything else threaten."

"And you seriously believe that she will?"

"Margren knows the price of disobedience." Mephistis turned his horse and rode away.

Dane's fingers curled into fists at his side. "So be it." Then he stalked off in the direction of entrance into the citadel.

\* \* \* \*

Concealed amid the foliage of low hanging branches of an aging oak, Margren and Bodramet watched Mephistis depart and Dane return to the citadel.

"The price of disobedience..." Margren growled. "He beats me."

Bodramet shrugged. "All true sa'necari beat their wives, mei ajan. It is nothing.

Seeing that she would get no sympathy there, Margren's mouth tightened and then twisted into a snarl. "He loves the youth more than me. Isranon is stealing Mephistis from me."

Bodramet allowed a tiny turn at the corner of his lips. "So it would seem. Now that is something I would be concerned about. That one is an abomination. It stains the

prince's honor to couple with him."

Margren stiffened, her eyes going wide. "Are you suggesting that Mephistis has made the youth his lover?"

Bodramet grinned ferally. "You put it so delicately, Lady Margren. The youth is fine to look upon. Most of our people, because of our blood appetites, are sexually indiscriminant. What else could it be? I have had my eye upon him, myself. As have many others. But the youth is so arrogant, he refuses to allow anyone save Mephistis and Dane to ride his ass."

"I hate him."

"You should. Do you fully understand why we call him half-a-mon?" Bodramet waited for her answer and slipped his arm around her shoulders.

"Because he will not participate in the rites?"

"You are very close. Because he refuses to participate in one rite in particular. We can smell its absence on it. See it in his eyes. Mortgiefan. He has never taken a life in the rites. He should have taken his first life at thirteen. Until he has sheathed himself in a ritually dying body, he will never attain his adult powers."

"But then, how am I to..."

"There are ways for the female to do it. More complex than the males, but still ways. I assume you haven't yet?"

"Not yet. Mephistis promised when he returned that he would take me through the final step."

"And that would be mortgiefan. If the prince would not recognize the signs, I would take you there myself in the rites. But I dare not cross him there. However, lovely one, there are other things I can teach you while he is away. Tell me, do you play nibble games, Margren?"

"No. I mean not yet." Margren allowed her fangs to descend, experiencing a heady exultation at their presence.

Bodramet stroked her face. "Lovely. To feel your fangs in me and mine in yours... Let me be your first. Let me teach you." He moved closer until he stood with his body pressed against hers, looking down into her eyes.

Margren shivered and her loins grew wet with longing. A tingling ran along her tongue and down her throat. "Yes."

Bodramet wrapped his arms around her and took her down amid the trees.

\* \* \* \*

Aejys' band made cold camp each night after leaving the monastery. They were descending now through a chain of narrow, deep-sided valleys and gorges. There were fewer pine and spruce, more maple and oak with a scattering of yew and hickory. Brundarad kept finding orc spoor, but no orcs. So Aejys thought it best to not advertise their presence with a fire. She also had them again picket their horses among the tents, scattered and at easy hand to their riders. A favorite orc tactic was to strike at the horses when they were picketed together in a group. Orcs did not ride horses, they ate them. More to the point, a soldier on foot was at a disadvantage against the wolf riding shock troops of the orcish cavalry.

They turned down an easier way through mountain glades of pine and rowan. The moon rose high. They camped beside another of the innumerable mountain streams. Tamlestari now shared Aejys' tent. They had taken Cassana's sword and other personal belongings, stowing them in Aejys' cedar chest. When they reached Yarrendar Aejys intended to give them to Geoa, Cassana's last surviving sister.

Aejys turned Gwyndar over to Tamlestari when they halted for the night the third day out from the monastery. She walked over to Eliahu and helped the mage down from the wagon. He moved with the tentativeness of an old mon, trying to avoid twisting and turning that might set his back to hurting again.

"Cold camp?" Eliahu asked.

"Yes," Aejys answered.

"Just as well," he said, his mouth shaping regret. "I'm not ready to start cooking yet."

"I did not think you were." Aejys gave him a gentle touch on the shoulder. "You're a good mon, Eli. When we reach Vallimrah and can sit and talk without watching for what my sister is throwing at us next, I want to hear your full story."

"It's a long story, I fear," he said with one of his broad, young-old smiles.

"That's the best kind." Aejys pulled out her pipe and leaned against the wagon, smoking.

"Then you shall have it." Eliahu turned and started supervising his helpers as they broke out the cold rations.

A hand suddenly snaked out and snagged the pipe from Aejys' mouth.

Tamlestari grinned up at her impishly, taking a drag from the pipe and waiting for a reaction.

Aejys lifted an eyebrow with the tiniest of askance smiles. "Thief."

"Only with you."

"You take my bed, my blankets, my heart and now my pipe. Where will it end?"

"As long as you let me? Nowhere."

"Is there something you should be doing?"

"I'm waiting for Eliahu," she said seriously, "I want to take his clothes off."

"What?" Aejys exclaimed.

The impishness returned to Tamlestari's face. "I need to change his bandages."

Aejys' voice went soft and very low so that only Tamlestari could hear. "You know what he is?"

Tamlestari nodded. "About four days now. If either of you want people to know you'll tell them. It isn't my place to blab. Whatever a Reader discovers is private."

Aejys retrieved her pipe. As she moved off to check the rest of her myn, she savored the warm feeling that Tamlestari left her with. Although by Sharani standards she was still quite young, a mere forty-two, the weight of responsibility had her feeling worn out like a middle-aged woman. Tamlestari reminded Aejys that she was still young, that there was still life to be enjoyed.

\* \* \* \*

Six weeks pregnant, Juldrid sat in a patch of sunlight, leaning against a bit of standing wall, her fingers picking desultorily at the strings of her mandolin. Just days into pregnancy she had taken to wearing loose robes and they were always black. She had ordered Margren's seamers to make her several of them. Then they had argued over her choice of color.

"You dress and act like you're in mourning!" Margren shouted.

"I am," Juldrid replied softly, staring at the far wall of their bedroom, doing everything in her power not to let Margren's presence or words touch her.

"Well, that's foolish! You should be happy. We've wanted this child for years."

"You and he ... you raped me, Margren..." she said still softer, more distant. "He's still ... still..."

"Don't be silly. You like it that way and you know it." Margren stroked her head and Juldrid flinched. "I've half a mind to send for him now just to prove it!"

"No! Please," Juldrid pulled away, "don't. I'm mourning for you, Margren, for the gentle person you used to be..."

"Oh, for Hell's Sake!" Margren hissed, turning away, then whipping back again to strike Juldrid hard in the face with her fist. "Get the hell out of here. Find yourself another place to sleep."

Juldrid fled, a hand to her bleeding face where Margren's rings had cut her.

She picked out a sad, bittersweet melody, singing softly to herself. A large furry black cat rubbed against her, drawing her attention from her song. She stroked the cat for several minutes, then began to play again.

The cat moved away, its form misting, changing. Soon a small, delicate young woman sat there, her head in her hands, elbows propped on her knees. Her large green, cat's eyes regarded Juldrid with concern. "You should have gotten that treated," the catkin said, reaching out to stroke the scabbed over wounds on Juldrid's face. "It's going to scar, you know ... if you don't let a healer fix it."

"Let it."

"Margren loves you," Hah'nah said, stroking Juldrid's face. Several more catkin in their cat forms emerged from hiding places, purring softly, and rubbing against them.

"Don't say that!" Juldrid said sharply, her hands dropping from her mandolin in mid-chord. The catkins purred louder, rubbing more insistently.

The little shifter sighed wistfully. "They could have taken me like that and I would have enjoyed it..."

"That's you, Hah'nah," Juldrid replied, her fingers reaching again for a chord.

"Let me comfort you," Hah'nah drew close, rubbing herself against Juldrid.

Juldrid drew away. "If Margren catches us ... you'll die..." she lifted two catkins from her lap, the little shifters had begun to lick every patch of exposed skin they could reach.

"It's my watch. No one comes up unless I call now that the two guildsmyn are dead."

Tears started in Juldrid's eyes: she had known one of them. The pair must have thought they had gotten away, but they had been followed home and slain. They used to come to court with their ma'aram to visit Ladonys, which was how Juldrid

met them. Then Hah'nah was kissing her hungrily, making her forget for a moment what Margren had done to her life.

\* \* \* \*

Hanadi rode point with Brundarad ranging freely ahead of her. He had failed to find the main body of the orc troops and she now held him closer. Aejys led the rest of her forces a short distance behind her.

Jaqui rode the point now beside Hanadi. The wind changed and Jaqui drew rein, her head lifted high, sniffing. "Orcs! They have come in down wind of us!" Jaqui clapped her horn to her lips and blew a hard blast.

A second later Brundarad's high-pitched howl of alarm echoed ahead of them. Hanadi settled her shield and couched her lance. "Brundarad shall have a fine breakfast."

Aejys led a charge to reinforce the point. A shower of arrows came down. Shields lifted to take them, but already several mercenaries and assassins had fallen. Then the orcs charged down on them with a wild cry and the barrage ceased.

Aejys slashed down at her attackers. Tamlestari rode close at her side as they tried to force their way out of the ambush. She turned Gwyndar and tried to reach her. In the moment of distraction a wolvesmyn plunged his mount between the horsemyn. His spear slammed Aejys' left side, unhorsing her. She crashed hard into the branches of an evergreen and struck the ground, her lance flying from her hand. The links of her dwarf forged hauberk held. Instantly her companions closed ranks around her. Briarmottë's mount pirouetted tightly and his sword cleaved the head from Aejys' attacker. Aejys staggered to her feet, grabbed the pommel, and swung back into the saddle. She heard alarm ripple through the ranks. They had seen her fall, but not seen her rise. Aejys pulled the horsetail helmet from her head, casting it away so they could see her face. "Hell shitting damnation! Hold that line and fall back to the wagons! Johannes take charge! Jeord! To me!"

\* \* \* \*

Tagalong dismounted to fight when she heard the first winding of Jaqui's horn. Her smaller stature made her less of a target than the mounted troops when the air filled with flying shafts. Nonetheless an arrow sailed past a rider and struck her. Her dwarf-forged mail turned it. An orc charged past her as she moved close to a tree. "Shaantak!" Tagalong gave the dwarves guttural war cry and caved his head in helmet and all with one blow of her hammer. She drew her sword in her left hand, laying about her with both weapons. "Shaantak! Shaantak Baruk!"

She sliced bodies and split heads as the first orcs rushed past her. They came on like a carpet of rats and now she had their attention. They pressed thickly around her; weapons seemed to come at her from all directions. It was to the credit of her

father's smiths that not a blade could mark her mail.

Tagalong put her back to a tree, her face grim. There were too many. She knew it was only a matter of time before the sheer press got her. One exceptionally large orc shoved his shield in her face, slamming her hard against the tree and pinning her in such a way that she could neither get sufficient purchase nor leverage to free herself. His sword came up to take her under the chin. Tagalong saw her death in the slender steel. Then abruptly he danced back shrieking and striking frantically at the ground around his feet. Another cried out and began striking likewise. Then another. Soon all the orcs surrounding her were hopping about and striking frantically at an assailant they could not see. Tagalong blinked. Something huge seized her by the collar, swinging her up and dropping her in the branches of a tree. "Bout time ya got here, ya big idiot! Now get me down!"

\* \* \* \*

Aejys turned Gwyndar, galloping back as her front line began to give. Jeord followed close behind. She dismounted beside the hostlers and wagons. "Get off!" Aejys shouted at Eliahu. The winter mage sprang off and cut the traces. The beasts bolted.

Pain shot through her side as she set her shoulder to the wagon and throwing all her weight and strength against it slowly began to overturn it. Jeord added his tremendous strength to hers and the wagon crashed on its side, wheels spinning. The other drivers, seeing what she was up to brought their wagons about and began turning them over, forming a makeshift fortress into which Aejys' reeling forces could retreat. Her archers were already taking cover around it and firing deep into the attacking ranks as she remounted.

Eliahu watched her go, murmuring the Snow Bear's words of blessing after her. He stepped to a narrow parting between the wagons, dropping down on all fours. The winter mage dug his fingers into the soil and with a word he cast a spell of ice around the outer perimeter, glazing the ground and leaving only the way Aejys' troops would be retreating through open. The orcs would have a hard time getting to the wagons, much less over them. Then he began adding a tall barrier of ice, building a fortress.

Aejys rode back into the fray, rallying her people, forming them up with shouts and curses. Slowly they pulled together, steadying into an orderly retreat. Even as they reached the relative safety of the overturned wagons, Aejys could spy scattered isolated pockets of her forces that fought cut off from the others and were slowly being pulled down. Aejys, a handful of Guild knights following in her wake, tried to reach the nearest knot. Fight as hard as they might they could not break through. In the dark it was impossible to be certain of her kills. Approaching dawn streaked the black sky with lighter gray. Aejys caught a wolvesmyn's lance on her shield. Gwyndar pivoted and she brought her sword down across it with a resounding



crack. Aroanan steel shattered the goblin-forged weapon. The wolvesmyn swarmed around her, their mounts snapping at Gwyndar's legs. One riderless wolf lunged in, snapping at Gwyndar's belly. The great steed reared, striking. Aejys shifted her weight, sensing Gwyndar's moves along their intuitive link even as he decided them, and reacted with her mount. The wynderjyn slammed through the ranks of the wolvesmyn, bringing Aejys within an easy stone's throw of the knot of beset soldiers when a sudden renewed effort by the orcs swept them apart again, isolating Aejys from her guard. She slashed from side to side with her sword, beating them down and back. A shrill scream from Gwyndar told her that the great animal had been hurt, whether bitten or cut she did not know. Aejys could feel him trembling between her thighs, mixing pain and anger as he struck at his attackers.

A booming war cry sounded at the southwestern edge of the battle "Ouhm Rahm Douhm!"

The battle paused an instant while defenders and attackers both turned their eyes to seek the nature of this new arrival. The Vorgen had heard that warcry before and a shout went up from their ranks "Clemmerick! Clemmerick comes!"

A huge rock came hurtling through the trees and landed in the midst of the goblins, crushing five. Two more rocks came, lobbed as if by some incredible catapult. "Ouhm Rahm Douhm!" A limb stripped tree whooshed through the air, wielded like a staff as Clemmerick waded into the orcs.

Josh followed in Clemmerick's wake and a little to the side of him, singing a drunken sea shantey. He snatched a fallen sword up and in his other hand he juggled little balls of bright fire, tossing them casually at the orcs with deadly accuracy. The orcs struck by the little balls screamed once as flames enveloped them, then dissolved into small conical piles of ash. Josh continued to conjure and juggle and toss. The orcs fled before him and he laughed delightedly as if it were merely a drunken game, before resuming his song. Josh wielded the blade with an economy of motion, brutally elegant in its simplicity and those who tried to flank him on the sword hand went down quickly.

\* \* \* \*

"Yes!" Aejys shouted, fighting with renewed fury. She spied the orc captain and charged down on him. He tried to parry, but the Aroanan steel beat down his defense and she separated his head from his body.

Even as the orcs recoiled from the ogre's attack, there came an echoing of silver horns winded from all corners of the mountain vale. Then came the trilling war cry of the Valdren. Arrows picked the orcs off with deadly accuracy. They hesitated in their assault, courage deserting them: where they might have handled Clemmerick's onslaught, adding the Valdren into the mix made the battle seem to boil up in their faces. Their ranks fragmented and broke into fleeing clusters. The Valdren drew their

silver swords, blazing red in the dawn light and cut them down as they fled.

Aejys drew a deep breath and relaxed. She slung her shield at her back, pulled a bit of white cloth from her pouch, and wiped her sword before sheathing it. Dismounting, she checked Gwyndar's wounds and found that none of the bites were serious.

The Valdren leader emerged from the woods, his bow slung at his back and his sword in hand. When he saw that no more orcs remained on the field before him he sheathed his blade. Borian Silverwing was tall and slender, his long hair auburn with silver streaks at the temples. His slanted pine-green eyes, the angle of his cheekbones and his ivory skin reminded Aejys of her lost Brendorn for they were maternal cousins.

The leader of the Valdren extended his hand to her. "Well met, Aejys Rowan! And timely, I think."

"Well met indeed, Borian!" Aejys greeted him. "And timely," she repeated his words with a nod. "The orcs nearly had us."

"And my kinsman? Where is he?"

Aejys' brow furrowed and sorrow came into her eyes, "Slain. In Vorgensburg."

"Ill tidings!" Borian's serious mien turned grave. "I will not ask the full tale until your people are safe in Vallimrah."

"I must see to them," Aejys told him.

Borian nodded. "I have brought healers."

\* \* \* \*

Aejys walked among the dead and the dying, many tended by the lesser wounded while they waited for the Valdren healers to reach them. She asked everywhere if anyone had seen Tagalong. Finally she found one who described seeing the dwarf surrounded and hard pressed, but had not seen her fall. She walked in the direction Tagalong had last been seen and saw a knot of people gathered around a still form she could not quite see. Her heart skipped a beat and, though it worsened the pain in her side, she walked faster.

But it was not Tagalong: it was Johannes. Aejys knelt beside him. A heavy blow had split his hauberk and he bled heavily from a torn stomach. "Aejystrys Rowan," he whispered softly, "Take care ... of ... my soldiers. They've..." a fit of coughing shook him, "no leaders left." His body gave a spasmodic jerk and lay still.

Aejys closed his eyes and murmured a prayer for the dead. Then she looked around

and shouted, "Tag? Where's Tag?"

A loud string of the ugliest profanities imaginable came from a high tree. "Godforfecking cockwhore shit! Stuck me up here!"

"What are you doing in a tree?" Aejs asked, her hands pressing the trunk as she craned her head to see.

Tag stood in a high crotch, firmly gripping two branches as she began to kick the tree and scream a fresh batch of obscenities. "Tree-shetling lizard-eater! Wait'll I get my hands on ya."

Aejs looked away quickly, fighting off a wave of dizziness.

"I did it," Clemmerick, who had come up behind Aejs, confessed sheepishly. His face glowed the deep scarlet of embarrassment. "I will get her down."

"Why?"

His scarlet face deepened to crimson. He shuffled his feet nervously. "Well, a bunch of orcs had her cornered so I lifted her out of harms way before I splatted them."

"Father of Stone!" Tagalong shrieked. "Do it again and I'll take off yar knee caps! I had everything under control!"

Clemmerick lifted Tagalong free of the tree, holding her at arms length while she swung frantically at him.

"Let him be, Tag," Aejs ordered sharply. "He saved your life!"

"Humph!" Tagalong snorted and started to stomp off. "That's a matter of opinion!"

"Go on, we'll discuss it later. Hanadi is the last unaccounted for. I must find her." Aejs' walk had become a limp as each step triggered a stabbing pain in her side.

\* \* \* \*

"Brundarad? Brundarad! Where are you?" Hanadi said, clambering among the dead and wounded. A short bark drew her.

Brundarad sat eating a lightly armored orc. The heavily armored ones he had ignored because it was difficult to get at the best parts. Entrails hung from his mouths like bloody noodles and he sucked them in.

"There is not much meat on that one," Hanadi said thoughtfully. "That one over there has more meat. I will shell him for you." She stripped a large orc of his armor.

As she did so, she paused to search his pockets and pouch. She found two of those golden charms, a strange blade that was wrapped in linen and a letter. She tucked them away.

Brundarad came and sat patiently beside her. When the hauberk came off he bit deeply into the dead orc's stomach, sucking up the entrails, and then the organs before settling down to gnaw on a leg.

"I thought you said he did not eat people," Aejs said, observing the grim meal as she approached.

"Humph! Orcs are not people. They are monsters. They eat human children."

"I've heard that. How many orcs has he eaten?" Aejs settled herself heavily on a fallen tree.

"Counting these? Two score, maybe slightly more."

Aejs nodded. "We have a semantic problem. I don't think—" Aejs broke off in mid sentence, the pain in her side doubled her over clutching at it. The forest seemed to tilt and turn gray.

Hanadi was at her side instantly. "Why did you not say you were hurt?" she demanded, easing Aejs to the ground so that she rested with her back against the trunk. "Where is the wound?" She scanned the hauberk for breakage and found that the steel links, although unbroken, had blood oozing between them.

Hanadi stripped off Aejs' armor. Her clothing and the pads around her side were blood-soaked. The impact of the spear thrust, which had knocked Aejs from the saddle, had reopened the upper part of her month old wound. But the extra padding which she and Tamlestari had added probably saved the lapsed paladin's life. Hanadi made a soft clicking sound with her tongue, "It will need a cautery this time."

Hanadi pulled Aejs' arm around her neck and grasped her about the waist as she stood up, bringing the tall Sharani with her. Aejs tried to bear most of her own weight, but weak and dizzy, she staggered, half stumbling beside Hanadi.

Briarmottë and Jaqui of Treth fell into step beside them. "Aejs," Briarmottë breathed sharply. He sprang to the Sharani's other side and grasped her as Hanadi did. "They're gathering the wounded next to the stream where the Valdren healers are tending them."

They moved faster then, weaving through the ranks of the dead and around bushes and rocks.

Jaqui went ahead of them to alert the healers.

Words of distress rippled through the survivors and less injured wounded as they saw Aejs brought in. Tagalong looked up from where she sat beside Tamlestari. The dwarf bolted across the clearing. Tamlestari gave a small anxious cry, darting to Aejs' side.

"A cautery! Quickly! She bleeds heavily," Hanadi shouted.

The healers reacted instantly. A blade was soon heating in the fire while another checked the wound. They turned her onto her good side.

"It looks worse than it is," Aejs muttered as Tagalong knelt beside her.

"Yeah, sure," Tagalong replied with a touch of skepticism. The dwarf took Aejs' hands and drew her arms clear of the wound. When Hanadi saw the hot blade taken from the flames she pulled Aejs' glove from the lapsed paladin's belt, rolled it up and put it between her teeth. Aejs looked away, her hands tightened on Tag's and she bit down hard on the glove with a muffled grunt as the red-hot metal seared her wound closed. Sweat erupted on her face and ran in rivulets that dripped to the ground. Pain glazed her eyes. Cautery was hard medicine to take. A cool hand felt her forehead and Aejs looked up into the gray-green depths of Eliahu's eyes, soft with compassion and concern. He laid his pilgrim's staff beside Aejs and offered her a small smile.

A Valdren healer supported her head and raised a cup to her lips. Aejs drank without asking what it was. It burned like whiskey going down, tasted sweet like almonds and cherries, and thrust her down into sleep before the taste even left her mouth.

Hanadi, seeing how swiftly the drug overcame Aejs, snatched the cup from the healer's hands and sniffed it. She tongued a tiny drop from the edge. Although eldritch drugs and poisons were a specialty of hers, there was nothing familiar about this. "What did you give her?" Hanadi demanded sharply.

Eliahu squatted beside her and took the cup. He tipped his tongue to it. "Fire poppy mostly," the Winter Mage said thoughtfully, "phoenix blood, holadil, and a trace of chamomile."

"You got nearly all of it," the healer answered, smiling excitedly, "you are an apothecary? Or a mage perhaps?"

"I'm a cook," Eliahu told him, "and I never forget a taste."

\* \* \* \*

"My grandsire has quarantined Rowanslea," Talons told Blackbird, settling an eye patch into place. "Not even a message can get out by now. We know for certain that at least a few messages went out before he could stop them. We don't know who

sent them or whom they went to. None of the Guildsmyn will get in or out. Many have already turned themselves in at the border. The shifters must be among those who haven't."

"It's too bad Wilstrynd died," Blackbird muttered darkly. The assassin chieftain had died before they got her as far as the city.

"Only grandsire, you, and the Urchins know she's dead..."

"Still don't think this is a good idea..."

"Just put the word out on the streets she's alive. Then I'll see what I catch."

Blackbird shook her grizzled head. "What if one of those shifters takes you out and comes back here in your skin?"

"Any of the kids a Reader?"

"Lizard and he's gonna be a good'un."

"If I object to being Read, kill me."

Blackbird heaved an exaggerated sigh, giving Talons a long, doubtful look. "Still don't feel right about this..."

"Have your doubts, keeps you cautious. But Wilstrynd deserves her vengeance, for her son and herself."

"Be careful, girl. Wilstrynd was an old campaigner, you're not. Can't help feeling you're heading for hell on a fast horse."

\* \* \* \*

Bodramet lay on his bed with Margren nestled nude against him. All except a single candle had gone out in the branch on the table beyond the bed. Margren's eyes had not yet turned violet. That would not come until her first rite of mortgiefan. Then she would need to spell them to pass as fully human. Bodramet's eyes glowed in the faint light. He ruffled her hair. "I cannot imagine how Mephistis could put that half-a-mon before you, Margren."

"I want to be rid of him," Margren growled far back in her throat. She licked her lips, catching the last small drops of Bodramet's blood that lingered there. "I want to watch his entrails spill across my hands as I open him up."

"Then call an orgy before the prince returns. We'll make the half-a-mon walk the gauntlet for our entertainment."

"Mephistis..."

"Tell him matters got out of hand. You have, after all, very little knowledge of our ways." He kissed her breasts.

"Yes."

"Gauntlets frequently get called at sa'necari orgies, especially if one of us is deemed less than what they should be. Or for other transgressions. We open a line for them to run in the great hall and kick and hit them, we try for a taste of their blood. If we manage to pull them down, we drain them."

"And should he get across?"

Bodramet laughed. "Then I will rite him. Do not fear for an instant that I will observe the rules and allow him to live. No, whether he makes it across or not, he will die."

"I want to stick him."

Bodramet laughed harder. "As you wish. That happens also. But you are not allowed to use a hellblade of any kind."

"I haven't blooded mine yet."

"Don't. Mephistis wants to be present when you do that."

"Is it permitted to poison my blades?"

Bodramet thought on that. "Sa'necari do not poison their blades. However, humans do. I will make certain that many of our human guardsmyn and servants are present to cover what you do. Only be warned, it takes a very powerful poison..."

"As it does for a Sharani. Ishla gave us near immunity."

"Then do it."

\* \* \* \*

Isranon accepted the water flask from Rose, wiping a sweaty arm across his face before drinking. He stood bare to the waist in the early autumn sunlight. The first chill was on the trees and a few leaves had turned, although none had fallen yet. Dane sheathed his blades and moved to sit on a boulder. Dane's nibari, Iola, lifted both a wine bottle and her wrist, gesturing for him to chose which he needed more after their hours of exercise.

"You are improving, Isranon. Were you human, they would be close to calling you blademaster."

Isranon settled beneath a pine tree, drawing Rose into the circle of his arms and resting his head on hers. "My father would be ashamed of me."

"This is not a time to be thinking about your father."

"He always said violence begets violence." Isranon settled beneath a pine tree, drawing Rose into the circle of his arms and resting his head on hers. "My father would be ashamed of me."

"This is not a time to be thinking about your father."

"He always said violence begets violence."

"Yet, it did not save them. It only takes one side to make a massacre when the other will not fight back." Dane pointed at the wine and Iola poured him a glass. He sat sipping and watching Isranon's face closely.

Isranon hugged Rose tighter. "I try to avoid them."

"You should not feel ashamed of learning to defend yourself, young one. Nor your mate. You should come away with us, when we leave."

"No. I am my prince's mon," Isranon replied stubbornly. He owed Mephistis a debt, had sworn an oath, and, even more important, at times he thought he understood the prince. He loved him, even while despising what he was. It twisted his insides up.

"Then Isranon, you must work harder than ever to learn to defend yourself and use whatever resources you can call on. Otherwise, both you and Rose are going to die."

Rose gave a small sound of fright at the vampire's words and clutched at Isranon's pants legs before turning in his arms to bury her face against his chest. She had still not caught a child from Isranon, despite their efforts and hopes: a nibari lucky enough to produce a child with the sa'necari gene was generally handled far more gently than the others and rarely killed. Isranon's mother had been nibari, although he never told anyone save Rose that.

"I will defend us both," Isranon vowed.

Dane heaved a sigh. "Isranon, at least, do not travel alone through the citadel until Mephistis returns."

"I will consider it."



## CHAPTER TEN. FIREBORN

Aejys woke in Vallimrah, stripped of her armor and clothing in a large bed topped by a brightly patterned coverlet. She wore only her bandages. Her black hair framed her bronze face like a fierce dark halo against the white pillowcase as she stared up at the broad oaken beams. Sunlight came through the open windows in warm golden shafts. She rolled onto her good side, leaning on her elbow to survey the cozy room, trying to discover where she was. Her clothing draped a chair topped by her suede hair thong; her armor lay on her cedar chest beside the door. Two heavily cushioned chairs framed a small table near the windows. A rumpled blanket lay, half covering one chair as if someone had slept in it. Tamlestari's quiver and bow leaned against the wall beside the chair. A vase of fresh flowers graced the table in reds and pinks mixed with purple heather.

Brendorn's mother, a slender auburn haired woman sat in a chair near the foot of the bed, watching her thoughtfully. Her hair curled around her pointed ears and her eyes were the color of new leaves. Laurelyanne wore a simple robe of hunter green and sandals with thongs that wrapped to her knees.

"You wake, daughter?" Laurelyanne asked, her voice soft and unobtrusive.

The lines around Laurelyanne's eyes had deepened since the last time Aejys had seen her; the lapsed ha'taren could see age and sorrow gathered around the Valdren mage's mouth. A rush of fresh grief swept through Aejys. "Brendorn..."

Laurelyanne sighed, nodding. "Tagalong told us. Parents should not outlive their children yet now the last of my three is gone."

"I'm sorry..." Aejys began but could not finish.

Laurelyanne rose, moving to sit beside Aejys on the bed. She embraced Aejys and they held each other a long time, letting silent tears run down their faces.

"We loved him," Laurelyanne murmured as they drew apart.

"My people?"

"Are being cared for," she replied, reassuringly.

"How bad were we hit?" Aejys asked.

"I cannot say," Laurelyanne confessed. "I have not left since they brought you in, except to eat."

"Tag?"

Laurelyanne dropped her eyes, a soft small smile parting the curtains of her grief. "I

will send Tagalong up. I have had a hard time keeping her out while you slept. Tamlestari watched you through yesterday and last night. She fell asleep in that chair and I covered her."

"How long?"

"They brought you in yesterday morning. It is now early afternoon."

\* \* \* \*

"They cut us to ribbons, Aejys," Tagalong told her grimly. "Half our company is dead or wounded."

Aejys' features drew tight, a deep sadness and sense of loss rippling through her as if one more pebble had been tossed into a darkling pool of sorrow in the middle of her heart as she thought again of Cassana. You vowed to place your life between Margren and me. That promise killed you. Even if you had not made that promise, you would have acted as you did. You died with courage and honor as you lived. You were a paladin in spirit, Cassana, if not in name. I cannot say the same for myself. Be at peace, my friend. If I can find a way to avenge you without dishonoring my vow to Kaethreyn I will do it.

Aejys swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her side twinged sharply, forcing her to rest for a moment on the edge. Sunlight fell across her, heightening the contrast of the pale scars criss-crossing her dark skin. When the pain eased, she went to her cedar chest, moving her armor to the floor and rummaging through for clean clothing. She pulled out a russet tunic with a square neck and a band of paler brown edging neck, sleeves and hem, dark brown pants and a change of under clothing. Aejys dressed, combed her fingers through her hair and thonged it back.

"Ya really think ya oughta be gettin' up?" Tagalong asked skeptically.

"It's a scratch, nothing more."

"It took a cautery! And ya got a cracked rib," Tagalong reminded her stubbornly, taking the spread-legged no nonsense stance that under normal circumstances preceded taking out her hammer. "Do ya get back in bed or do I put ya there?"

Aejys felt an urge to smile at her friend's protectiveness and tried to resist it before finally giving into it and turned her face away from Tagalong's to conceal it. She watched the dwarf from the tail of her eye. "I have things to take care of. Walk with me. I must see to my people. I want a full account of our losses."

Her side hurt, but not nearly as much as three weeks ago or even yesterday. She descended the stairs gingerly, holding to the rail to keep from sending spasms into her side as her weight shifted from foot to foot.

Tagalong followed her closely. "Aejys, remember all those touch healers and lifemages they used ta have here six years ago?"

"Yes." Aejys frowned, wondering suddenly why none of them had come forward to save Johannes.

"Well, they're all either dead or disappeared. Someone's goin' around slayin' lifemages. Every one, every kind they can find."

"Hell shitting damnation!" The curse came snarling from Aejys' mouth "That stinks of Waejontor!"

"Uh huh! And Margren's sleepin' with the enemy, you said."

Aejys shied away from the last: in the absence of anger it was hard to face. "Who was hit the hardest?"

"That big idiot Jeord took one in the ass, but otherwise he's just fine. Johannes is slain and both of his lieutenants. In fact, Johannes' group was the hardest hit. Altogether we started out with just over five score leavin' Vorgensburg. Now we're down to just under two. Lotta good myn died, Aejys." Tagalong took a golden charm out of her pocket and passed it to Aejys. It hung from a greasy orc's neck thong.

"Margren. It has to be," Aejys muttered. "She must be brought to account. But I can't do it. I must get Laeoli and Ladonys out of there alive."

"That vow was one of the stupidest things ya ever did," Tagalong growled, "Keepin' it's even stupider."

"I didn't have a choice."

"I'd've just walked off."

"I can't live that way."

Tagalong walked over and threw her arms around Aejys' lanky legs in a long hug, "I know. I understand. Ya just leave Margren to Hanadi and me. Don't ya worry about it at all."

"My honor ... my vow..."

"It ain't broken if ya don't know about it... Trust me, Aejys, please."

Aejys loaded her pipe, lit it, and took a long draw. She smoked it down, and then returned it to her leather pouch and her pocket. "Be careful, Tag. And don't do anything that could start a war or a mutiny."

"I won't. Hanadi searched through the dead gobbies and found several things yuh need ta see. I found several gobbies killed in the oddest manner. Looked like they'd been struck by lightnin'. I'd say we had a mage if I didn't know fer sure we didn't. And there was a coatin' of thick ice round the wagons. More magery, if ya know what I mean."

"Clemmerick?" Aejs changed the subject since she had told no one about Eliahu.

"Just fine. Brought Josh and Grymlyken with him."

"Josh? Why Josh?" Aejs had not seen him following in Clemmerick's wake, juggling mage fire. She liked the alcoholic sailor, but she could not think of any reason for the practical minded ogre to have brought him.

"Cause he's a mage, Aejs," Tagalong said in a matter of fact tone, watching closely for her reaction.

"Josh? A mage?" Aejs' face twisted with astonishment and incredulity.

"Yup. And its all yer fault, ya know," Tagalong continued evenly.

"No, I don't know. You can explain it to me while we walk. And everything else you've been holding out on me."

Tagalong rolled her eyes. "Dunno if ya want to hear it all."

"All of it," Aejs said sternly. "How can I make good decisions if I don't have all the facts."

Laurelyanne met them at the bottom of the stairs. "I would order you back to bed, but I know you would not listen. We buried your dead by the north gardens," she said, touching Aejs' arm. "Your fallen captain, Redbeard, lies in state beneath a canopy by the Oak of Sorrows. Your wounded are in the Houses of Healing. You remember where that is? We tried to split the rest up in different houses, but they all refused and are camped on the North Commons."

Aejs started for the door and Laurelyanne halted her.

"Wait," she said reaching into a corner near the door. "Take this." She extended her a tall Maplewood staff covered with delicate carvings of birds and flowers.

"Brendorn made it for me when he was a child. It will make your walking easier."

Aejs grasped the staff, sorrow in her eyes. She threw her arms around Laurelyanne. For several minutes they held each other. Then Aejs withdrew gently.

"I must see to the others."

"I know."

\* \* \* \*

Green Haven, the capital city of the Valdren people, nested on the broad central plateau in the Phoenix Mountains. Many smaller towns and hamlets nestled throughout the mountains as well as a multitude of shepherds' cotwolds. Aejys and Tagalong emerged into the muted sunlight that filtered through the spreading boughs of the gigantic Valdren cedars and ash trees of Green Haven. Widely spaced rows of tall, brown-trimmed white houses encircled the central commons. On the east side beneath the mystical shelter of a stand of sacred blue rowans rose the Long Hall of Meeting. To the north of that stood the spreading, branch-like spires of the Temple of Willodarus and to the southeast, the Palace where the descendants of Eldarion Havenrain still ruled the Valdren people. Turning south, Aejys could see the broad square of the Healer's quad where her people were being tended. Due north, just before the North Commons, stood the Oak of Sorrows and the Field of Heroes. They had to pass by it to reach the tents of Aejys' company.

The Oak of Sorrows was the tallest and oldest tree in Vallimrah. It took a score of myn, linking hands, to encircle its gigantic gnarled trunk. Its branches spread so far that all alone it covered the Field of Heroes from end to end, reaching out over every corner. Legend had it that the Oak was the first tree planted on the reclaimed lands by the God Willodarus, patron and father of the sylvan races. It was also claimed that the great ancestral hero Eldarion Havenrain had been buried beneath the Oak although no one knew where.

The bier of Johannes Redbeard stood a little ways apart with orc weapons and armor piled around it. An honor guard of six stood at attention around the bier: Two from each of the colors. Johannes' people now wore a bit of black ribbon tied around the red.

Aejys gazed at the bier a long time, trying to decide where to go first: her camp to check on her people who would need to be reassured that her wounds had been slight and she was still there to lead them; or the houses of healing to check on her wounded who would need whatever comfort and reassurance she could give them that they would not be abandoned. Then a piquant, laughing face entered her thoughts. "Tag, where's Tamlestari?"

"Helping out at the Houses of Healing," Tag replied, hoping that Aejys would put off the interrogation long enough for her to come up with plausible reasons for all the things she, Cassana, and Tamlestari had not informed Aejys about since their little war got into gear.

"That's where I'm going. You go on and check on the camp. I'll be there presently."

Tagalong grinned broadly, grateful to be excused for the time being. "Sure thing, Aejys."

\* \* \* \*

Tagalong walked through the orderly rows of tents, whistling. Most of what she and the others had withheld from Aejs were mere speculations, which they preferred to keep until some hard evidence showed up. Tagalong knew there would be several reports waiting for her at her father's smithy in Armaten. If she could get Aejs to wait a while, she could give her good answers. But the answers were not in yet. At least Clemmerick and Josh had more than justified their tagging along without leave.

Aejs' tent stood in the center with the rest of the tents radiating out from there. Tagalong nodded to the myn she passed, feeling gratified by the respectful nods that even the Red Ribbons gave her. She poked her nose into Aejs' tent and noted that a couple of Aejs' books were laid open on the cot which showed signs of being slept in. She found a change of Tamlestari's clothes folded under the pillow laying askew at the head, a discarded pile of the youth's clothing at the foot and her packs resting where Aejs' cedar chest normally stayed.

Impulsively, Tagalong bent and sniffed at the blankets. They smelled of Aejs: Tamlestari had not changed the sheets. "Can't sleep with her, so she'll sleep where she slept," Tagalong muttered. She had not had many lovers in her life, not nearly as many as Aejs, but she had a keen eye for love when she saw it. She knew the difference between love and infatuation, perhaps better than most since she had always been an observer and almost never a participant. The nearest she came to that emotion was the passionate devotion she felt toward Aejs.

Tagalong would never forget how as a ten year old Aejs had followed her fearlessly and uninvited into the slums of Armaten to find the truth behind the tales the dwarf regaled her with. The rest of the students at the Temple, mostly the daughters of the aristocracy and nobility had avoided or outright snubbed the young dwarf, first of her race to be allowed to study there. Aejs had been different from the start. Different enough to nearly get herself killed by Blackbird's gang, the Market Street Urchins, before Tagalong realized Aejs was there and intervened. Aejs' clothing and manner had made her look out of place and hence an easy mark. After that Tagalong took Aejs under her wing in the darker corners and Aejs returned the favor in the school and aristocratic precincts where the Sharani did not ordinarily welcome non-Sharani.

Tagalong knew that the Urchins were still there, although the membership and leadership had changed as the gang aged. It would always be a kid gang. Blackbird had later served under Aejs in the Great War. The traits that Tagalong's family most objected to in her were the very ones that Aejs valued the dwarf for: insatiable curiosity; a tolerance for and delight in the lower classes; a streetwise savvy; and a penchant for running into interesting, often dangerous, situations even when she was not looking for them.

"Yer not goin' down, Aejs. Not if I have anything ta say about it. Father of Stone! GimliGloikynen, hear me!" Tagalong's voice rose almost to a shout, "If ya don't give me a hand here, I'll put my faith in Cussè Dynanna instead!" That was a tremendous insult to the dwarf god since Dynanna, God of light-hearted mischief and sheer perversity, was a very young, very minor deity while GimliGloikynen was a very old, very sober god of dwarves, stonemages and metal-working.

Tagalong clapped her hands over her mouth, peeked from the tent, and looked quickly around, hoping that no one had heard her blasphemy. The myn moving about the camp paid her no heed. So she walked out into the center. A small group sat at the front of a tent on the near east side, three rolling the bones and another five looking on. Jeord was one of the watchers, bent, hand on knees, his wounded posterior thrust up higher than his head. The healers had bandaged it so that he could get his pants on, and then tied a pillow to his ass. Even with the extra padding, Tagalong suspected that sitting was still problematical for the big man.

Tagalong hailed them as she walked up. The myn paused in their gaming to acknowledge her with friendly nods and greetings; they did not invite her to join in. Aejs had put a firm stop to that.

Jeord gave her a sheepish grin and gestured her aside. "We got to talk," he said.

The dwarf wondered what about, considering that their last encounter had been when she beat him up. "What about?" she asked suspiciously.

He looked even more embarrassed, touched his finger to his lips with a shake of his shaggy head, and motioned to a tent farther down.

Tagalong followed, her curiosity peeked. His pillowed butt and odd waddling stride (no doubt because he'd taken a sword thrust to the posterior) reminded her so much of an overgrown duck that she put her hand to her mouth to stifle a chuckle.

He showed her into the tent he shared with his brother, Ragnar, who was back throwing the bones. The place was a disheveled mess with clothes and gear strewn about.

"So what is this about?" she asked.

"I want to apologize," he said, ducking his head like a scolded Sharani schoolchild.

"For what?"

"For calling you what I called you."

Tagalong nodded. This is promising. "Okay. That was weeks ago. What's got ya up now?"

"I'd've gotten cut worse than this," he said, patting his pillow, "if it hadn't been for two of the green's women."

"So why apologize ta me?" She pushed a bit more, her curiosity aroused.

"I hadn't insulted them," he said, staring at his feet.

"So?"

"You gave me my first lesson. They gave me my second. You females sure can fight!" he lifted his head with a shine of pure admiration. "I saw you. You sure gave those gobbies a beating."

Tagalong's entire face brightened, dispelling the lingering humiliation from finding herself up a tree during the battle. Her eyes grew large and luminous, one side of her mouth quirked halfway to her cheek and showed her big white teeth with the pure victorious delight of a child as she tucked her thumbs in her belt and prepared to receive due homage. "Ya saw me?"

"Yah. You were tremendous! Meaning no disrespect, but you're not married, are you?"

Tagalong gave him a long askance glance. She had an odd feeling that she knew where this was leading. "No."

Jeord sighed happily. "Good." He pulled something long and glistening from his pocket, extending it to Tagalong.

The dwarf gasped. It was the most beautiful necklace she had seen in years: a delicate string of obsidian, rose quartz, and Valdren amber carved into flowers. "Omagosh! That's gorgeous!" she said fingering it.

"Will you wear it?"

"No strings attached?" She eyed him skeptically.

"None. Can I call you 'Tag'?"

"Sure," she said, slipping the necklace over her head. She smiled. The very last thing she had ever expected from the big man was happening: Jeord was courting her in his clumsy fashion. Not that she intended to let it go very far, but it was delightful nonetheless.

\* \* \* \*

"Bad things, Brundarad," Hanadi muttered in Euzadi to prevent anyone from understanding. "Takhalmé has quarantined Rowanslea. What has happened must be



bad indeed. Very, very bad. Our units only will be allowed in, but you are to sniff each and every one of our people that comes or goes. And everyone who has not come or gone. Yet he does not tell me what it is you sniff for!"

Brundarad rumbled deep in his throat.

"Well, if you know so much, then you should tell me!"

He gave another low rumbling.

"Humph! Lot of good you are!"

\* \* \* \*

Laurelyanne regarded the mon on the cot thoughtfully. He looked ill. Eliahu sat near him. She unfolded a campstool and settled beside him. "He's a mage, you say?"

The weeks of pushing himself and the twisted magic had finally settled on Josh in a crushing exhaustion, made worse by the battle. All he wanted to do was sleep and be left alone. Clemmerick and Eliahu had insisted on bringing this mon to see him anyway. Exhaustion had banished his spiritual desolation, leaving him too tired to feel anything, making it both a blessing and a bane. The dreams and visions were gone, but few feelings roused past the numbness.

"He's the one sparked the rumors of Aeijys having a battlemage in her company," Clemmerick informed her. "She doesn't. It's just Eliahu and Josh."

"When he's sober, you can't find even the smallest trace of it." Eliahu explained. "Well, almost nothing. When I scanned to the deepest levels I found the traces of a mage net in his neural nets and power centers. I believe he was born with a gift that could have rivaled that of the Abelards, but something burnt it out of him." Eliahu glanced meaningfully at Clemmerick who shrugged.

Clemmerick would never tell Josh's secrets. If Josh wanted them known, then Josh would have to tell them.

Laurelyanne took Josh's wrist and Read him. He resisted passively and she stroked his head like she would a child, considering him. She had seen few adults this traumatized and those usually had gone through some of the worst of the magical fighting of the Great War. How this mon who had grown up on the Northwest Coast far from the war's reaches could show signs of its worst effects puzzled her. "I have a keen sense for mage gift and a secondary healer's sense. I would venture that he might have a tiny mage ability, but nothing like what you describe, Eliahu. Nothing at all. Those of my people who saw this manifestation of power spoke of a classic style battlemage, a sword in one hand and power in the other."

"Would you like a drink, Josh?" Clemmerick asked.

Josh managed only a tiny whisper. "Yes."

Clemmerick poured a double jigger of dragonsbreath, passed it to Laurelyanne and she helped Josh to drink it. Then she Read him and her eyes saucered. "Gods, what have we here?"

Josh screamed, dumping himself off the cot at the far side and cowering.

Instantly Grymlyken started under the cot to him, but Laurelyanne stopped him, got down on her knees, and motioned him back. "I'm sorry, Josh. I was only surprised. There's nothing bad about you. I didn't mean it that way. I was just surprised. You're a good mon. Get back on the cot and rest. You've tired yourself, and I want you to rest while you're here. Walk about. See the sights. I have some things to do today. Then I'll walk you around and show you some things. Pretty sights. Take you shopping. We don't have seashells, but we have other pretty things. Would you like that?"

"Yes."

"Good." Laurelyanne rose and left the tent.

Eliahu followed her out. "What's wrong with him?"

The earthmage paused a moment, leaning upon her staff. "It won't get better until he starts to talk about it."

"About what?"

"Burn out. This was deliberately done. I would guess a parent or someone had the magic burned out when he was a child. Perhaps because it frightened them."

"Can you help him?"

"I can try. However, I've never heard of this being successfully reversed. Mitigated, yes. Reversed, no."

\* \* \* \*

The Houses of Healing were four long simple white buildings set in a quad with a bright herb and flower garden in the middle that was just beginning to show the brown of autumn. There were no signs on any of the buildings: the Valdren disdained the way humans' tacked labels and signs on everything; instead they just knew where things were.

Aejys, remembering the way from an earlier visit, entered the main building. The first room looked like someone's parlor except for the shelves of herbs and medicinals

lining two walls instead of bookcases. Two small tables, one round and the other rectangular, sat in the middle flanked by short couches and over-stuffed chairs. Water simmered on a small stove in the farthest corner. A freshly made pot of tea sitting on an iron trivet with four porcelain cups surrounding it spouted steam in the middle of the round table. She found Tamlestari sitting at the small table in the foyer, looking tired and worn, sipping tea from a cup cradled in both hands. She lifted her head, smiling wearily in greeting as Aejys took the chair next to her.

"Two more died this morning," she said softly. "Healers, priests, and readers can only do so much... Especially when infection sets in. We needed lifemages."

"Tag told me – they all disappeared."

"They're dead," Tamlestari replied, her face grim. "Four of those rings belonged to lifemages from Green Haven."

"What happened to the rings?"

"Cassana sent most of them to Charas. One she sent to a stonemage in Armaten, cousin of Tag's. I hope they got there." Tamlestari's expression grew grimmer still, she stared into her tea, her hands tightening around the cup, despite the heat.

"Cassana sent messages to several places, including Vallimrah, telling Laurelyanne of Brendorn's death. She never received it."

"Estari..." Aejys slipped an arm around Tamlestari, worried as much about the youth as the information she imparted. "Are you going to be alright?"

"Eventually," she promised, kissing Aejys lightly. "Come on, it would be good for morale if you walked the ward with me."

The ward was long with sixteen rows of beds. The Valdren felt that misery needed company so they had few private areas in the four buildings. The room had not been so full since the last Great War. A cheer went up from the lightly wounded as Aejys entered, startling the healers and priests moving among them.

Aejys looked at Tamlestari and saw tears in the young healer's eyes, her mouth set with outrage and anger. "I wish I could do something," Aejys told her, one hand squeezing the younger woman's shoulder sympathetically.

"You could kill Margren," Tamlestari said with an edge and a catch in her voice.

Aejys shivered at the sound and the look in her lover's eyes. She moved away rather than face it. "You know I cannot."

Then Aejys went from bed to bed, comforting, sympathizing, and sharing stories of the great battle. All had lost friends and comrades fighting the orcs. Although there was sorrow in some of their voices, there was also an undercurrent of excitement:

many had just fought the hardest battle of their lives and won through. They spoke of Clemmerick and Josh as the heroes of the day, coming to the rescue and hitting the orcs from behind. Aeijys marveled at the descriptions of Josh, singing his drunken chantey and juggling fire, disintegrating orcs so that the others fled from him. A few spoke of his sword skill and Aeijys wondered still more at that, for she knew Josh had no weapons skills or training.

\* \* \* \*

Aeijys left through the back door, stepping into the garden quad from the side. She stood, eyes closed, letting the breeze blow across her face. The scents of rosemary and sage dominated the garden. She thought of her tavern, missing the companionship of her regulars and staff. Becca loved to gossip and Aeijys enjoyed listening to the tavern master. Some of it was new and much of it was amusing recollections from years past before Aeijys arrived in Vorgensburg. She ached to be back there, to be living her simpler life again without the intrigues and deceptions of her ma'aram's court. Her stomach tightened at the thought of seeing Margren again.

She left the courtyard, walking out of the city proper into the forestlands beyond. Aeijys knew every path, had walked them with Brendorn many times before the war. She reached a small stream thick with reeds and enormous water loving ferns. Aeijys drew her sword, kissed the Aroanan Rune, and shoved the blade into the ground. Then she knelt before it, trying again to pray.

Death walked at her shoulder, she could feel him breathing on her neck. How many of her friends would die before Margren could be stopped. What was the price? Her own death? If that would bring Margren down, then she could die without regrets. If only Laeoli and Ladonys could be brought to safety. If Margren died then they would be safe whether they left Rowanslea or not. Tamlestari and their unborn child would be safe...

She began one of the higher devotions, continuing even after she felt the tension forming in her stomach. This time I will finish, she promised herself. The pain of guilt, fear, and desperation coiled in her gut, climbing through her nerves and muscles. No. Bile rose from her stomach, burned in her throat. She smelled burnt flesh, heard the screams echoing through her memories. Her mouth twisted, drawing back from her teeth as she forced the words out. She felt the stone trolls' grip on her arm, pinioning her... Bile boiled up from her throat, burning, spilling into her mouth. No. She tried to swallow it back. She felt the blades slicing her legs.

Aeijys balled up, pressing her arms into her stomach. A few more lines of the devotion remained. Her lips moved in the ritual phrases. Then her stomach heaved as the flashback overwhelmed her, overriding her will. She collapsed into the tall grass, vomiting and weeping.

A sweet, strong voice completed the ritual phrases above her and she turned her

head to gaze up at Tamlestari. Aejs had not heard her come. The devotion completed, Tamlestari raised Aejs into her arms, splashing her face with water from the stream, drawing her back from the grip of her nightmares. "You nearly finished," Tamlestari told her encouragingly, "Our God hears us. All will be made right in the end."

"I want to believe that," Aejs said, recovering in her lover's arms. "But it's hard."

"I know."

They sat and simply held each other until night came. Then they made their way to Laurelyanne's house to tell her about the child.

\* \* \* \*

A large group gathered around the Oak of Sorrows in the early afternoon of the third morning in Vallimrah: all of Aejs' company who could walk as well as those who could safely be brought out on litters by their unit mates with the healers trailing along beside and behind. A company of rangers in brown and green spread out and around them followed by many of the folk of Green Haven.

Tehmistoclus, the withered, ancient High Priest of Willodarus presided over the rites of burial in his silver-gilt, dark green robes. They laid Johannes' casket into the earth, piling the weapons of his fallen foes over it. Aejs led her company, greens, reds, and black ribbons, past, throwing earth upon it, gradually transforming it into a mound of brown dirt. Eventually grass would grow over it and the grave would become just another mound cared for by the gentle priests and their servants.

Laurelyanne stood near Tehmistoclus, an arm around Tamlestari who looked on in grim silence. Aejs glanced as she passed, meeting her lover's eyes, trying to read the darkness in their green depths, and failing before walking on. The Valdren came last, strewing flowers as well as earth. A dozen Valdren sounded their silver horns in the last farewell. Then the assemblage began to break up.

Aejs started toward Tamlestari, but a gentle hand on her arm stopped her. She turned to see Tehmistoclus beside her. He stood almost as tall as Aejs; his eyes, green to the edge of black, connected to hers with an imperceptible lift. Aejs perceived a light, blended of kindness and tempered strength, in their depths as he regarded her, measuring her in a manner he had never done on her previous visits to Vallimrah. "Do you know who Kalestari was?" he asked – a simple question suddenly loaded with unknown depths.

Aejs wondered where it was leading. "A Valdren hero raised among my people." She added, "She was my friend."

"And that is all you know?" he pressed, an indecipherable quality entering his voice. "Think, Aejs' Rowan, on your honor, is that all you know?"

Aejys took her pipe out, filled and lit it before answering. "Yes. That is all I know. Why?" She dragged in a deep breath, filling her lungs with the comforting herb, blowing it out through her nose.

"Then you do not know who her blood child, Tamlestari, truly is. You do not know her lineage?" he asked carefully.

"Where is this going?"

Tehmistoclus shook his head slightly, dismissing her question. "Tamlestari Odaren brye Desharen de Havenrain," he said, giving Tamlestari her full lineage.

"Havenrain?" Aejys felt herself caught in deep water well over her head. "No... I did not know."

"For Laurelyanne's sake we will assume that is true for the moment."

"It is true. On my God's honor..." Aejys said fervently.

"Tamlestari is the last princess of the line of Valestari and Eldarion Havenrain. Her great-grandmother is our Queen Magdarien."

Aejys never knew where her next words came from or why she blurted it out without thinking. "Does she know it?"

Tehmistoclus shook his head. "When the time is right we will tell her. It was her bloodmother's wish. And all our people are held by it. Until then we will ward her as best we can without turning her from her life's path."

"And how will you know it is time?"

"I will be given a sign. Your lineage is noble, Aejustrys brye Rowan, but it is poor and pale compared with hers," a sharp edge of disapproval entered his voice, his eyes narrowing. "I am told she carries your child after the Sharani fashion. Who is the father?"

"Brendorn," Aejys answered, feeling acutely uncomfortable under his methodical probing.

"And what are your intentions?"

"Honorable. I intended to ask you to hold a bonding."

"Then why do you say otherwise?"

"To protect her from my enemies. The fact that it is my child she carries would

endanger her. It will be safer if certain people believe she was already pregnant when we became lovers."

"And is that common among your people?"

"In a land that is almost without males of its own race? Yes, frequently. Men are shared, loaned, rented, bought, and sold. The majority are imports. Usually only in the upper classes are they married, although our women marry amongst themselves."

"Walk with me, I have many questions about your people. When our young men return from working in your land they are reticent to speak of certain of your customs. And all of this will have bearing on our decisions concerning this relationship of yours."

Tamlestari and Laurelyanne hailed Aejs from across the field. Tehmistoclus followed her gaze and nodded to them.

"Can we have this talk later? Tamlestari needs me right now."

"Forgive me, I am being thoughtless," the priest said, giving her such a deep compassionate glance that Aejs momentarily felt he could understand anything she might say which coming on top of their conversation left her feeling off balance. "You will lunch with me tomorrow? Just you?"

"Gladly." Aejs bowed and left him.

\* \* \* \*

Since there were now more tents than myn, Tagalong had one to herself. The first night she had slept on Laurelyanne's couch, waiting for Aejs to wake. Then she returned to the tent she had shared with Cassana and Tamlestari, which now seemed sadly empty.

The dwarf woke late. She sat up on her cot, stretching and yawning deeply. A bright blue drew her eyes to a folding campstool: A change of clothes had been laid out. Her previously muddy boots, leaning against the legs, were not only clean, they had been polished.

"What the—"

Then she spied the tray of Valdren pastries on the little folding table: three frosted angels oozing with sugared cream; two stacks of maple glazed funnel cakes; and a big square of cinnamon apple bread. It looked like heaven to Tagalong after weeks of trail food, especially during the days of forced march.

"Tag," Jeord poked his big nose into the tent. "Are you awake? Is there anything else I can get you?"

"No. This looks mighty fine."

Jeord nodded and withdrew. He sat gingerly down outside the tent, wincing at the first contact between his bottom and the ground. Tagalong grinned and closed the tent flap to dress.

\* \* \* \*

When Aeijys and Tamlestari came down for breakfast, Hanadi, five Green Ribbons and one of Aeijys' Vorgeni drivers were waiting in the parlor. An object lay on the table wrapped in black cloth. From the shape Aeijys knew it for a knife.

"What is this about?" Aeijys asked.

Hanadi rose from her chair. "There are several items you should see, Aeijystrys Rowan. We should start with that one." She indicated the wrapped blade.

Aeijys watched as Hanadi opened the cloth cautiously without touching the blade itself even though she wore gloves. Baneblade. Baneblade. The certainty beat in Aeijys' chest and head, as unreasoning fear seemed to creep up the patterned scars on her legs and shoulder.

"I do not want that thing in my house." Laurelyanne watched from the doorway, holding an ancient mage staff of walnut heartwood. An intricately carved eagle at the staff's head held between its wings and beak a flawless moonstone orb. "It stinks of death and darkness, daughter."

"One must often endure the stench of the enemy to properly gauge their strength and nature," Hanadi replied stiffly.

Aeijys sucked in a deep breath, fighting for control, forcing her legs to carry her near enough to see it, determined that no one would see evidence of her fear. The blade was both beautiful and frightening like the eyes of a scarlet cobra before it strikes. It radiated power, crying out to all in the room to touch it. Even Aeijys felt the pull. The hilt was blackened bone glazed with a transparent crimson, etched with runes of darkness that continued along the blood groove of the glittering silver blade.

Laurelyanne moved to the lapsed ha'taren's side, as did Tamlestari. Aeijys knew enough of sa'necari magic to read the death rune, but most of the others were unknown. Her stomach tightened and the lines of her face turned grim, her lips, and eyes narrowing.

"Where did you get this?" Aeijys asked in a voice gone harsh and rasping.

"From a dead orc captain," Hanadi said evenly. "I have suspicions of this blade. It may be that it was intended to be found by someone of less knowledge than myself,



Aejystrys Rowan. I have brought Aspen to test it," she said, motioning for the Vorgeni driver.

Of Kwaklahmyn blood, Aspen wore his black hair in two braids with large bone beads woven in. He hesitated, glancing at Aejs for confirmation, and rose from the table at her nod. The guildsmyn rose with him, fanning in a half circle around him and Hanadi. Aspen looked at the Guildsmyn dismayed, but resolute, determined to serve his liege in whatever way was demanded of him. He cast Aejs another questioning look. She nodded again. He stepped to Hanadi's side. "What do I do?"

"Aspen," Hanadi said, "Your loyalty to your master is unquestioned? You have worked for her many years?"

"Yes. My life I give to her service."

"Then pick up the blade."

His eyes lost their focus as his fingers curled around the hilt and he stiffened as if struck before sagging to his knees with a low animal moan. Aejs started toward him, "Aspen!"

Tamlestari caught Aejs' arm, holding her back. "Wait."

Aspen's eyes closed; lines of strain appeared in his face; his mouth grew taut. The skin around his eyes darkened into pools of purple shadow. A fit of violent shaking seized Aspen as cold sweat beaded on his dark skin and ran in icy rivulets down his face and arms. The shaking gradually diminished.

"Aspen?" Hanadi queried softly, stepping closer to him.

In response his eyes snapped open eliciting a murmur of horror even from the seasoned guildsmyn: His eyes, the whites gone, were the glowing bloody violet of the sa'necari. He slammed Hanadi aside, sending her hard into the wall as he sprang forward to his feet. He caught the nearest guildsmon beneath the breastbone with the blade. The man screamed, collapsing as Aspen jerked the blade free, snarling wordlessly, froth foaming at his mouth. With a wild cry Aspen threw himself at Aejs, striking with the baneblade.

Several things happened at once. Tamlestari yanked Aejs backwards out of the way. The lapsed paladin struck a chair and tumbled to the floor. Laurelyanne's staff blocked Aspen's rush, the moonstone flaring white-hot. Aspen recoiled, shrieking in pain and rage. Hanadi rolled to the side as Aspen retreated in her direction. She came to her feet like a cat, daggers out. Aspen turned on her. A guildsmyn stepped in at his back, deftly throwing the transformed driver on his face. Hanadi stepped on his hand, forcing the cursed blade from his grasp as two of her myn piled into him. Protected by her gloves, Hanadi returned the blade to the cloth.

"Sooo," Hanadi hissed. "It is as I suspected: a seeking blade. Who ever found this blade was to become your assassin. Golethyn, take him to the temple. His soul needs cleansing."

They bound him with spellcords, dragging Aspen still struggling, alternately moaning, and snarling, through the door. As Golethyn passed, Hanadi made a discrete sign, which brought an almost imperceptible nod from the Guildsmyn. Aspen would not reach the temple alive. Hanadi was taking no chances.

One of her myn knelt beside their fallen comrade, and then looked to Hanadi, "Faz is dead."

"Take care of him," Hanadi ordered coldly.

"I told you it was of death and darkness," Laurelyanne said. "It was forged for your death, daughter. Now get it out of my house!"

Hanadi bowed deferentially, shoving the wrapped blade through her belt.

"A seeking blade," Aejs gasped. She made no move to rise, feeling deeply chilled. I have again come within a hair's breadth of dying in the only way I truly fear. Is there some curse upon all the Sharani leaders who burned Waejontor? I was happy in my tavern.

Tamlestari gave her a hand up. A Green Ribbon righted the fallen chair. Aejs sat down on it. "It takes years to forge one of these. Five were sent into Shaurone in the early days of the War. One for each of the Mar'ajans. Two found their marks." Aejs shuddered, passing a hand over her eyes. "I saw the Lionhawk's ma'aram die that way..."

"Margren hates you, intensely hates you," Tamlestari said. She looked grim and troubled, her hand squeezing the heavily shielded leather pouch that held the arrowheads.

Aejs glanced at Tamlestari from the corner of her eyes, pulled her tobacco pouch from her pocket, and loaded her pipe. "I can barely believe that Margren would be so deep into the darkness ... or have that kind of power."

"Were not the Waejontori and the Sharani close kin in the misted past?" Hanadi asked archly with a slight sardonic smile.

"Yes."

"Hmph," Hanadi snorted. "There you have it." The assassin chieftain bowed to all and departed.

\* \* \* \*

A mouse scurried across the corridor almost at Rose's feet and she yelped, crowding back against tall Corcyr as he and Rhium walked her from Isranon's quarters that morning. Corcyr chuckled, clearly amused by how a person who did not flinch at the thought of finding fangs in her neck could be startled by a mouse or other innocuous creatures. The reaction was uncommon, but not rare. After all, most nibari were forced to endure their first bleedings around the age of twelve and it was done without the anesthetizing mind-magic so that they would know exactly how much pain there could be and appreciate the master's consideration in blocking most if not all of it once they had learned to submit properly. Rose was young, healthy, and deliciously tempting to all of Dane's people. However, her blood belonged to Isranon. Unlike the sa'necari, these vampires were honorable myn.

Each morning they came for her and returned her to their nibari chambers where she would be safe from the sa'necari. Torches in black iron wall sconces lit the corridor, throwing a flickering light when air shifted from tiny unseen cracks no wider than a blade through the halls. Few areas of this dark womb within the bluffs of Dragonshead received even the slightest sliver of natural light and morning looked no different from night. Corcyr and smaller Rhium. They turned a corner and found their way blocked by four sa'necari, all masked.

"Back away," Corcyr ordered roughly.

"Give us the nibari and leave," the leader of the sa'necari responded.

Corcyr drew his sword. "No."

Rhium gave a sharp cry and Rose screamed, turning to see a sword point emerge from the vampire's chest level with his heart. Another group had come upon them from behind. Rhium's body, truly dead now, crumpled to the floor.

"Damn you!" Corcyr slammed into the sa'necari, his blade counting for three in the first minutes of fight. He had to break free before they could bring their spells into play and tear the soul from his undead body.

"I carry a sa'necari child!" Rose screamed as hands seized her and she was thrown over a sa'necari's shoulder. Another one shoved a gag into her mouth.

"A soon to be dead child," murmured a familiar voice.

Rose continued to scream, but no sound could get past the wadded cloth stuffed and tied in her mouth. More sa'necari poured into the corridor. Corcyr saw the spells coming for him and slashed through their webs with his rune-blade, but another caught him and he went down. His soul gave a whistling sound of utter despair as they tore it out of him.

\* \* \* \*

Isranon answered the knock on his door, wondering what Dane's people wanted now. A small sa'necari stood there, one of Bodramet's sycophants, named Yoris.

"Your little Rose." Yoris grinned, his watery blue eyes glittering, and his thin lips twitching into a snicker that emerged from his nostrils as well as his mouth. "Your Rose has been taken. Go to the Great Hall immediately or she dies." Then Yoris scampered off.

Isranon snatched up his blades, buckling them on as he ran. He passed no one in the corridors. They must all be in the great hall. At the entrance he found his way blocked by sa'necari, guardsmyn and nibari several ranks deep. They were seated everywhere, on the steps leading down, on the couches and chairs – many, many more had been brought in than were normally present – and on the steps of the dais where Margren sat watching from her throne beside the empty one which Mephistis normally occupied. Laughter and conversation filled it. The only silence came from those who were already feeding from a nibari. Wine flowed freely through a thousand glasses. A cold tight knot formed in Isranon's stomach. Margren had declared a Sowayn orgy. This night Isranon would be eighteen and he had no doubt that he would leave this world on the same night as his birth.

Margren spotted him and gestured with her wine glass. "The entertainment has arrived."

A path opened down the center and a small corridor of sa'necari moved to allow Isranon to reach it. Bodramet, Troyes, and four others waited on the far side of him with Rose. Bodramet had her by the hair, keeping her on her knees. He yanked the gag from her mouth.

"Isranon, no! Go back," Rose sobbed. Her arms and breasts, exposed by her torn gown, showed savage bite marks, and bruises. They had already been feeding on her.

"Cross the gauntlet and I will let you have her back," Bodramet promised.

Isranon snapped his shields tightly around his mind and body. The others would have to get past them with their spells, but he did not lie to himself about how long they would hold, which would not be long. If he were lucky they would hold long enough for him to strike and interrupt the assaults. He sucked in a deep breath and started down the steps. Margren's laughter drifted over the room as a moment of silence gripped the others. Then, as his foot touched the bottom, voices rose again, making bets on how far he would get before they killed him.

Isranon's expression went flat as he drew his blades and sought the stillness in the core of his being. This was not the silences, such as his father had taught him, but the predator's way he had learned from Nevin, his lycan mentor. This was the moritause, to walk with death, in its certainty. He felt certain that Dane would keep

his promise to tell Nevin he had died well. His gaze never wavered from Bodramet's, yet he had opened his vision to the farthest corners of his eyes in an all-inclusive manner, and his awareness would catch the smallest movement around him. Nevin had taught him this, as well as how to fish, hunt, and use his blades, which appalled his father, the pacifist. He tried to be every bit the man Nevin would expect him to be. He will be proud of me and make a song of my death.

He left the sword at his shoulder. This was a battle of presence even more than power. Drawing the sword would be perceived as a sign of fear, whereas his belt knives, in their approximation to what the sa'necari carried themselves, would not be. Isranon moved instinctually with straight-backed, loose-limbed arrogance carrying the blades in his hands, but not poised to strike. Should he move too quickly toward Rose, that would be interpreted as weakness and they would swarm him. Should he stumble and not regain his feet fast enough or should he hesitate, the result would be the same.

For the first two yards, the sa'necari hung back like hungry wolves waiting for a traveler's fire to go out before descending upon him. Then one of them hit him between the shoulder blades and it began. Isranon pivoted, and with an economy of motion, kicked that one in the face, sending him solidly into those pressing forward. He walked on. Three more hit him, coming in a small rush from the sides. Isranon ignored those, continuing his walk. Another sank fangs into his shoulder, trying for his neck. Isranon slashed that one across the face, blinding him. The youth crossed two more yards. His shoulder throbbed. Getting loose from that one had torn him open and blood began to spread through his blue tunic.

The hungry noises from the room crescendoed into a roar. More pressed forward and Isranon noticed that the blades were coming out. The sa'necari held them low, half hidden in their sleeves and around the folds of their robes. The rules said they could not use runed blades, hellblades that always killed, but that did not mean that one of them would not do so. His flesh crawled, wondering which direction it would come from. He controlled his fear, forced it away from him, because they would taste it and, the taste of his fear could provoke them – even though it was fear for Rose and not himself.

The assaults grew more frequent, more savage and he would respond with attacks, short and vicious on those around him. Just enough strikes to make his point. Not turn it into a prolonged fight, for then they would simply kill him. They beat him, knocked him down. He dragged himself up and walked on. Then the first blade slid under his ribs with a twist. Isranon stifled a gasp, spinning to drive his blade into his attacker's throat even as that sa'necari lifted his own blade to stick him again. The assailant went down, gurgling and clutching at his throat. Blood would not heal that one since he no longer had throat to swallow with. The others fell back from him. Each step had become an agony with the wound in his side. Yet he walked on.

Bodramet's eyes flamed with lust watching Isranon, he ran his tongue over his

fangs, and his member tented his pants. He shook Rose by his grip on her hair to emphasize his control of her and she clutched at his wrists, twisting. "Watch him die. He's lycan-reared. To look away is to dishonor him."

Tears gleamed on her face, but Rose did not look away.

Isranon nodded, stalking deeper into the crowd, reaching the midway point. By then his presence vied with Bodramet's for control of the room's.

Margren came down from her chair and pushed through to the outer edge just ahead of Isranon's advance. "Thief of his affections," she muttered low.

Two pulled Isranon down, sinking fangs into his arm and leg. Isranon grimaced, swallowing back a pain noise as he put a blade through their hearts, striking down through the back on of one and arching the other knife up under the breastbone of the second. Then he rose and went on, limping now.

Margren drew her blades as Isranon neared her. A putrid green coated the silvery metal. "When sa'necari kill sa'necari, they do it well."

She allowed him to pass her, then stepped forward as two large males grabbed him. She used these them to cover her intentions. A gap showed between them and she could see Isranon's exposed back. "You'll not steal Mephistis' affection any longer."

She shoved both lengths of steel into his back with a vicious twist.

Isranon's eyes widened in shock at the impact of the blades, staggering forward, struggling now for each step. The venom that Margren had coated her blades with burned like acid in his body. A sa'necari deepened in the rites might have shrugged it off. Isranon's will alone kept him moving. Sensing weakness, the sa'necari closed tighter around him. Another blade found him and Isranon responded by killing the one nearest him. He knew then that he would never reach Rose. His awareness began to gray along the edges. He could no longer take in all of them. At least he would not rise, sa'necari always made certain of that when they killed one of their own.

Margren retreated into the crowd, fading slowly from the gathering until she reached the farthest edge to watch a moment before withdrawing completely.

Isranon reached the foot of the stairs and stood looking up at Bodramet. He swayed on his feet, fighting to stay upright. Four rushed him from the back and sides. He struck the step hard, cracking his knees against the edge. A blade entered his ribs and fangs his neck. Isranon fell face down, twisted, and put a blade into the eye of the one sucking blood from his neck. The sa'necari released him and Isranon dragged himself forward step by step.

Bodramet's expression turned incredulous and he moved back a short distance, gesturing for those around him to stop the youth. They allowed Isranon to reach the

top and then fastened on him. Isranon's blades slipped from his fingers. Bodramet kicked them down the steps. The youth struggled briefly, making small, suffering animal noises and then lay still.

\* \* \* \*

Dane walked deeper into corridor, kneeling now and again to scratch notations on the paper he carried. There had been several enormous soul vaults in Dragonshead during the years of the first godwar, long before the present Pantheon of the Light came, before the sa'necari existed, before the lineages of vampires now existent had been created. Dane knew, because he had been there. He had spent centuries slumbering beneath a fallen building before waking when the debris was disturbed. His God wanted the contents of the soul vaults before the sa'necari could stumble on them or the Trickster find them. Although the Trickster was of the light, Dane's God considered her almost as dangerous as those who served the hellgods. Dane allowed the dark ones to make their own guesses about what he was. Rumor and ignorance were his favorite tools and had served him well. His liege-god was Ishla the Tinkerer, only survivor of the original pantheon, who had summoned the eight other gods from across the void to defeat the hellgods. She had a penchant for creating creatures that mimicked the creatures of darkness to infiltrate their ranks, match their powers and destroy them. Her peoples were scattered and few in numbers, still finding themselves again, but they served her faithfully. Dane was certain the Trickster had spies here also, although he had failed to discover them.

"Dane!"

He glanced back and saw several of his people running toward him. He met them, catching one who stumbled to his knees. "What has happened?"

"The sa'necari killed Corcyr and Rhium. They took Rose."

"Margren declared an orgy," added another of Dane's folk.

"Come on." Dane started back. "They're using Rose to get Isranon."

\* \* \* \*

Dane found his second in command standing at the edges of the orgy with five other of his folk. The vampires had established themselves within the mouth of the open corridor at the edge of the great hall to hold a direction for retreat should it become necessary. They watched the spectacle of the youth's struggle, their faces a mix of anger and indignation. Blood mad vampires were the first to be discovered, tracked to their lairs and destroyed by the humans and their allies. For that reason the vampires, especially the royals like Dane's group tended to destroy their rogues as the first sign of it. The sa'necari, on the other hand, seemed to all gripped by the blood-madness. Having their own realm, they had become too habituated to simply taking what they wished to.

A good two spear-widths separated them from the sa'necari who seemed to have not yet noticed their presence. They murmured uneasily amongst themselves as Dane arrived just minutes after Isranon had passed the midway point. The youth was in pain, but moving stubbornly forward.

"He has nerve." Dane said, his eyes narrowing dangerously. "He is a better mon than the rest of them."

"Of a mon twice his years and experience," answered one of Dane's companions.

"He makes it. Mark my words," said one of them. "He makes it."

"Bodramet will simply kill him."

"They're supposed to let them both go. That's the rules," replied another.

"Have you ever known sa'necari to play by the rules?" Dane asked.

"There's nothing we can do. They outnumber us," said another. "Filthy death-eaters."

"Margren was here a moment ago," said another. "She's vanished now."

Dane nodded, stroking his sword hilt. "We'd never reach him. I'll not waste your lives for nothing. We can pay some of them back before we leave here." Dane's hand tightened on his sword's hilt until his knuckles whitened.

Isranon's body jerked, his shoulders arching backwards and Dane's second cursed. "They stuck him! Damn it, they stuck him."

Four yards from Bodramet, Isranon went down again and the vampires cursed.

"He would have made it... He would have if they'd kept their blades out of him!"

Bodramet laughed at Isranon as the Dark Brother forced himself up again.

"Dane!" Hekatorys came up to them. "The prince is on the bluffs. He returned early."

Hope lifted the corners of Dane's eyes and eased the grim set to his mouth. "I'm going to fetch him. Watch and remember." Dane ran down the hallway.

Finally Isranon got within two yards of them only to be dragged down and this time he did not get up. Dane's vampires started to rush out, but his second stopped them.

"There is nothing we can do, but die. Let us hope Dane returns quickly with



Mephistis."

Rose began to weep as Bodramet shoved her to her knees beside Isranon's still body. Isranon lay in a huddled, unmoving ball, his blades inches from his nerveless fingers. He bled from many wounds. Bodramet touched him and found some waning life remaining. "You chose the wrong sa'necari," he told her. "Bring him. I will finish this in my chambers."

Bodramet shoved Rose at two others. Troyes and Gareth dragged her away.

\* \* \* \*

Dane reached the bluffs atop Dragonshead and found Mephistis and his guards dismounting in a clearing near the inner circle of the ruins. His abrupt entrance sent swords sliding from sheathes before they recognized him. Mephistis gestured for them to sheath their weapons. He turned, drew a long, wrapped object from his saddle, and started toward Dane.

The prince had a pleased expression. "I have brought Isranon a gift for his birthday. I remembered it and returned early." Then the look in Dane's eyes registered. "What is it?"

The bitter edge in Dane's voice was as sharp as well-honed steel. "They're making him walk the gauntlet. They're killing him." The fact that Mephistis had brought Isranon a birthday gift, made him want to weep at the image of joy lost in the desolation of death. He remembered his promise to Isranon to carry the tale of his death to Nevin. Isranon would never accept the undead state and would seek the true death if he rose – but when sa'necari killed sa'necari they did it well and their victims never rose.

Rage suffused Mephistis' face, he gestured for the horses to be attended to and for the others to follow. "How could you allow this?"

"I was not present. Margren called an orgy for Sowayn while I was exploring. They murdered two of my people and took Rose. Isranon went after them." Dane would miss Corcy and Rhium, but their deaths would not hurt as much as Isranon's. They were warriors, while Isranon always seemed somehow sacrosanct. An innocence and purity would go out of the world with Isranon's death.

Mephistis strode swiftly across the open ground to the hidden stairs leading into the bowels of Dragonshead, using his arts to increase his pace. Dane, not wanting to reveal his own abilities, ran to keep up.

"Bodramet stands at the head with Rose in hand. There are too many for us to reach him."

"You will not need to reach him," Mephistis snarled, his eyes glowing a deeper

crimson red with building rage.

Dane could feel the way Mephistis called his power together and the vampire felt a chill like a rake of icy claws go down his back. It had long been speculated that the Legacy of Waejonan had not passed to King Baaltrystan as it should have, but to his younger brother, Mephistis. Dane was now certain of it. Mephistis held the Legacy, which made him the most dangerous sa'necari alive. Dane's people moved aside to allow the prince passage. The first thing they saw was Isranon's huddled body laying at Bodramet's feet. Four of Bodramet's coterie reached to lift Isranon up, their hands just closing on him.

Mephistis paused in the shadows, his lips twisted into a snarl, fangs fully extended like some incredible nightmare beast. Power danced around him in shifting patterns of flame and blood as all semblance of humanity fled his countenance. He lifted his hand as he tilted his head until it rested on his shoulder and, with a sharp gesture, sent a lance of blackest power to hit Bodramet between the eyes. Bodramet screamed and fell to his knees, clutching his face. His followers hesitated and drew back from Isranon. They dropped him and pressed themselves against the wall, looking about for a direction in which to flee, but Mephistis' guardsmyn had already blocked the other corridor, while a sea of onlookers barred them from crossing the hall. The prince stalked through the chamber, randomly striking his people down. Cries rose around him, people not struck dropped to their knees. Dane's vampires followed Mephistis.

Dane knelt by Isranon, Reading the crumpled body and found a small spark of swiftly waning life. He cursed silently in outrage. Clearly Bodramet had intended to rite the youth, possibly because Isranon had shunned his bed. To be refused by the person at the bottom of the ladder of power must have caught in Bodramet's throat.

Dane gestured a nibari over and opened the male's wrist with his dagger to make the blood flow more freely, then shoved it into Isranon's mouth. Blood frequently roused sa'necari even from coma. Isranon's body responded automatically, his fangs came down and he fed without returning to consciousness. Dane took that as a good sign, although it would have been a better one had it been accompanied with a return to full awareness.

Mephistis seized Bodramet by the throat and slammed him against the wall, snarling. He hit him with enough power to crumple him up in a still heap. Then he spun on the four members of Bodramet's coterie who had been ready to bear Isranon off, pointing at two of them. "Secure them for the rite. Set up a bleeding table in the center of this place, on the dais. I want all sa'necari present to watch and see how I deal with those who disobey me. I will ride them into death."

The chamber fell silent and then six sa'necari, wishing to please the prince, came forward and spellcorded Mephistis' selected victims so that they could not access their powers. Others broke away, going for the table the prince would use in the rite.

"If I hear of any deaths among the nibari there will be deaths among the sa'necari. I am hungry. Understand? Six of you nibari bring Isranon to his chambers where I may examine him." Mephistis hissed, glancing at Bodramet. "Isranon belongs to me and me alone. No one touches him."

Dane could see that Mephistis' demand that nibari, not sa'necari, bear the youth was a statement of his distrust of his own.

"All month like this?" Mephistis demanded as he strode to Isranon's rooms.

Dane Jayce nodded. "He tries to keep it secret."

They got him back and Mephistis Read him. All sa'necari were Readers. It helped them to savor the terror of their victims, which they drank in like wine, feeding upon it as well as the blood. What Mephistis sensed appalled him and he opened Isranon's shirt. The young man's body was massively scarred. "What have they been hitting him with? Blood should have been healing all! Kenda'ryl? Baneblades? Hellblades of some kinds? What?"

"Some of this is very old, Mephistis," Dane Jayce told him. "It was always there. He frequently scars. They know it. It makes them wonder what he is. They can smell the sa'necari blood in him ... yet..."

The rage seeped out of Mephistis' face. He stroked the dark curling hair from Isranon's face, "Can you save him?"

"I can try. I have several tonics made from troll's blood. And other things. I've been allowing him access to some of them. It's the way he's been coping with their physical abuse."

"Stubborn prideful idiot."

"He's going to get himself killed one day."

Mephistis turned away, trying not address that statement. "I fear that is what he wants. Keep an eye on him. Heal him."

"I will, my prince."

Mephistis snatched a nibari to him, forced the mon to his knees and his wrist into Isranon's mouth. Isranon's fangs came down, and he became to suck automatically without waking. "Get that bottle, Dane. I don't want to lose him."

Dane's second entered, glancing about the room. "Rose? Has anyone seen Rose?"

Dane's expression tightened. "I will send people with the bottle and to tend him. But

I must find Rose."

Mephistis gave a curt nod. The vampires were not his to command, although they dwelled here for the moment on his forbearance and cooperated with him. "Go. But when you return, there will be matters to discuss."

"As you wish."

\* \* \* \*

Toward dawn Dane spied a slender hand poking out through the edge of some bushes in a corner of the ruins. When he got close, he found that the wrist was bound to a short stake driven into the ground. Freshly-cut pine branches covered her. Dane hurled the branches aside and knelt. Her body lay staked out, spread-eagled. He touched her neck, Reading her, and found that she had not been dead long. A gag in her mouth had prevented her from screaming while the sa'necari had been violating her. Rose had been slashed and pierced by many blades in a rite of mortgiefan. The sa'necari had ritually raped Rose as they killed her to shatter her soul so that the one who rode her could suck up pieces of it to increase his powers – but Dane suspected that power had nothing to do with this. They had done this to hurt Isranon simply because he was different. Matters were spiraling out of control and Dane saw Margren's hand in all of it. He would need to take his people away from here soon, before it could reach out for them also. Dane decided to try and persuade Isranon to go with them.

He carried Rose's body to an isolated spot and buried her, then he returned to Mephistis. The prince of Waejontor had moved to his parlor and sat with his wine glass in hand. The birthday present he had purchased for Isranon lay in the middle of the table, wrapped in velvet. The prince's fingers strayed to the velvet, stroking it idly in an unfocussed manner. "Did you find her?"

"They rited her..." Dane dropped his gaze for an instant and then raised his head again with his brows knit and mouth tight. "She was carrying his child. Isranon and she thought that pregnancy would protect her."

Mephistis' expression chilled. "Perhaps that was for the best. Isranon should never have allowed his emotions to become engaged with a nibari. I have thought about this. Did Isranon manage to kill any of them?"

"Three or four."

"Good. Tell me about it." Mephistis said, his voice taking on a calculated tone. "And I am sorry about the child."

"But not about Rose?" Dane could not keep the anger out of his voice, although he knew he should. "When you first came here, they found they could not break him, but they could use his devotion to others ... you know that."

Mephistis nodded. "The nibari is of little import to me. I have many of them. If Isranon wanted a child, he should have chosen something other than a nibari to get it on. However, that is neither here nor there. While I feel for his loss, I also question the wisdom of his choices."

"This afternoon, Bodramet took Rose. For the past weeks before you gave her to me, they had been passing your young mon around like a toy periodically. They would seize Rose and threaten the actions that Bodramet finally committed."

"You are saying that Bodramet did this?"

"Not he himself. But his coterie. Isranon killed some of the lower ranks to force their attention to stay on him, which only made them hungrier for him."

"You should have spoken, Jayce,"

"I did. You simply told me to keep an eye on him."

"I am going to put a stop to this."

"Then start with Margren."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN. BREAKING THE PROMISE

Aejys dressed in her dark blue silk tunic with her device worked in azure and silver across the chest. Tamlestari insisted on acting as the lapsed paladin's orderly. She pinned the silver ouroboros clasp of her dark blue cloak at her shoulder, hung the Aroanan sword at Aejys' side, tied both the scarf of penitence and the black armband with Brendorn's hair to her lover's arms. She brushed Aejys' hair with loving strokes and thonged it back.

"I wish I were going with you," Tamlestari said.

"I wish you were too. Somehow I feel like a school girl being sent to the priest for a scolding."

"You don't think he is angry with you?"

Aejys shook her head. "I have done nothing to offend him, loyal heart," she said, kissing the tip of Tamlestari's piquant nose, "unless customs have changed since last I was here."

"Good. Because if he is offended with you, then I am offended with him. Though I seriously doubt that would carry much weight."

Aejys smiled. "That might carry more weight than you realize," she said, taking Tamlestari in her arms for a long moment. She dropped to her knees and pressed her cheek against the youth's stomach. "Our child and hope."

Tamlestari stroked Aejys' head with the serene benevolence of an ancient queen for a beloved subject. "Aroana is with us. I can feel it. I have felt it since you quickened my womb. There will be darkness, but there is light beyond it."

Aejys smiled as she got to her feet. "So now you are prophet as well as reader?"

"I am whatever you think I am," Tamlestari replied pertly. She reached up and drew Aejys' mouth to hers in a quick hungry kiss. "Now, go on, you cannot keep the High Priest waiting."

\* \* \* \*

Tehmistoclus greeted Aejys as his servants showed her into his study. He wore a white linen robe, the sleeves tapering to his wrists with a delicate brocade band at wrist and hem. Skylights and high windows admitted the afternoon light in flowing golden shafts. Thousands of books stood in rank upon rank of shelves with alcoves scattered here and there. Aejys marveled, for if this was only his personal study what must the temple library look like?

Then she noticed, sitting in a corner near the window in a chair that was half in shadow, a mon. The mon rose, she was incredibly beautiful with a straight small nose, high cheekbones in an elegant face with a full shapely mouth. Her large green eyes reminded Aejys of both Kalestari and Tamlestari. A simple circlet of silver held her long pale gold hair in place.

"May I present her Majesty, Magdarien, Queen of Vallimrah." Tehmistoclus inclined his head politely.

"Your Majesty." Aejys acknowledged her with a courtier's bow.

"I am here," Magdarien said pointedly, dismissing ceremony and going straight to the issues, "because Tamlestari is my great grandchild and my heir. I hope, for your sake, that I do not discover you are taking advantage of her inexperience."

Aejys glanced at Tehmistoclus, "I hope that I can put your concerns at rest, your Majesty."

"As do I," she said. "I have often regretted my promise to her ma'aramlasah in allowing the girl to be raised among your people."

Tehmistoclus gestured at a round table. Aejys waited until the queen had seated herself, then joined her there. "Had you planned on this child?" the priest asked.

"No."

"Did Tamlestari know you were pregnant when you made love?"

Aejys squirmed. "Yes."

"So then, as I understand you," the high priest said, steeping his fingers. "You roused the kyndi... Surprised? One of our young men who spent years in your land explained the kyndi to me last night when I pressed him. As I was saying, you roused the kyndi and shoved your child into the virgin womb of the last daughter of our greatest lineage. Isn't that rape?"

"I did not rape Tamlestari. Is that what Laurelyanne told you?"

"Not in so many words. She called it love. But Tamlestari is an impressionable youth, while you ... you are a hero of the war... You already have a nearly grown daughter. If it was not rape, then it was certainly undue influence. Seduction of the worst order."

"Does Laurelyanne know who Tamlestari is?"

"Everyone in Vallimrah knows who Tamlestari is. Except, of course, Tamlestari herself. And we are all watching you very closely. Until now we have believed you an honorable woman. But if you cannot satisfy us now that your relationship with Tamlestari is an honorable one, we will execute you for touching her."

Aejys sighed. "May I smoke?" Tehmistoclus nodded, so she took out her pipe, filled, and lit it. Slowly she told them all that had happened since Tamlestari, Brendorn, and Cassana had arrived in Vorgensburg. She resisted the urge to point out that Sharani girls were rarely virgin past the age of twelve, for in a realm beset and besieged sexual maturity came young; that Tamlestari was more Sharani than Valdren by her rearing and half-blood; and was he going to track down everyone the girl had slept with in the last four years? No, Aejys sighed again, re-loading her pipe, Tehmistoclus would take that as tearing down Tamlestari, even though it would not be by Sharani standards. Besides, I got her pregnant. They didn't.

Now and then Tehmistoclus interrupted with a shrewd question, probing. His face softened as he listened. When Aejys finished, he covered her hands with his.

"So I see no dishonor here. Though perhaps it is misfortune. Or perhaps not. I can see beyond our lands no longer. Although the Great Evil in the North was defeated, it had already cast forth its seeds upon the wind. They have taken root in many places."

Magdarien, who had listened impassively throughout the tale and questioning, spoke "You must not, Aeijstrys Rowan, believe for a single moment that this relationship of yours is permanent. Tamlestari must one day wed a lord of our people."

A ripple of impending loss raced through Aejys, she wanted to cry out against that statement, that it was unfair to take Tamlestari away from her just as they had found each other. But Aejys, raised a noble of Shaurone, knew that the state must be served. There was resignation in her voice as she said, "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Then we understand each other. We will help you. I will ask for volunteers to go with you when you leave to guard and guide you through the wilderness. And I will send word to all our people from here to Doronar. They will look for Laeoli and aid you in any way they can."

"I would leave Tamlestari behind, if I thought she would stay. I doubt she would. And to force her would be to dishonor her," Aejys told them. "You need not look for Laeoli, I have word that she is safe." And I would be terribly lonely without her. I left Brendorn and now he is dead. I will not leave Tamlestari behind. Not for the best or worst of reasons. If I have any choice in the matter.

\* \* \* \*

Tamlestari woke nauseous and ill. She tipped herself out of bed, felt her stomach rise to her throat, and vomited on the floor. Instantly Aejys was up, supporting her while she retched. When she could finally stop, Tamlestari leaned weakly against Aejys, feeling humiliated and unhappy and disgusted with herself.

"Morning sickness. Ladonys had it." Aejys eased her back into bed and covered her. "Rest. I'll clean it up."

"I feel awful."

"I'll fetch a tray of tea and toast. If you have something in your stomach before you start moving around it will help a little."

"I can't eat." She grimaced. "The mere thought of food makes me feel sick all over again."

"Yes, you can," Aejys said sternly, "And you will. You're eating for two now." She caressed Tamlestari's stomach fondly, thinking of how in a few weeks it would begin to round and then to swell with their child. She remembered how hard Laeoli had kicked in the womb, imagining how hard this one would kick. "It will pass soon, my dearest one, the child is..." Aejys paused to count on her fingers. "Nearly three months already."

\* \* \* \*

Mephistis swirled the wine, red to the point of blood, in the goblet and pushed away from the mantle when he heard Margren enter. It was time to teach her a lesson. He loved her passionately, but he felt certain that she had played her part in what had



happened to his young friend. Mephistis would not tolerate it. He ruled his household. Although on the surface Waejontor was a realm of laws and traditions, underneath it sheathed with treacheries, those who could not rule were ruled.

"My love?" Margrenan brye Rowan crossed the room and ran her hands along his shoulders. He shrugged her off, walking away from her. "What is wrong?"

"Isranon. He heals slowly and I worry about him."

"You worry about the little half-a-mon and that is why you reject me?" Margren snapped, stalking after him.

Mephistis spun on his heel the moment she reached him and doused her with the wine. She shrieked and went for him with her nails. He deftly imprisoned her wrists with one hand and forced her to her knees. "You played a part in this game to hurt him, because you were jealous."

Margren's eyes filled with tears and her mouth twisted with anger. "You chose him over me. Everyone always chooses others."

"Don't be a fool. I love you. You are my mate. But I will never see this happen again from you."

"If you love me, then choose. Choose me and let him die."

"Then I will have to kill you." Mephistis waited until her wordless shrieking had died down before he spoke again. "I have a policy. I always kill the one who demands the other's the death. That is how I rule. You either trust me when I say I love you or you do not trust me. The problem is not me. It is not Isranon. It is you. Do you trust me?"

"Yes," she replied in a very small voice.

Mephistis released her wrists. Margren started to rise, but Mephistis caught her hair and the front of her tunic. He slammed her onto her back on the thick carpets. Margren made a small sound of fright as her tunic ripped in his hands. His mouth covered hers. He continued catching hold of her clothing and tearing pieces of it away until he had exposed her.

"I love you," Margren whimpered as soon as he withdrew his tongue and his lips lifted from hers.

"Then prove it to me," Mephistis snarled.

Margren opened her legs to him.

"A beginning..." Mephistis twisted her head around until she was positioned as the

lowest of the nibari beneath his weight with neck exposed. And he took her in the favored vein, before entering her as a man. When he had sated himself, he beat her. Margren curled up beneath the blows, covering her head.

"Do I love you, Margren?" he screamed, kicking her.

Margren huddled against the couch. "Yes."

The prince kicked her away from the couch onto her stomach while she vainly tried to shield her face from his blows. His boot came down on her back between her shoulder blades. "Say it again."

"You love me."

"Again!"

"YOU LOVE ME! YOU LOVE ME!" Margren screamed at the top of her voice. "I will never question it again."

"That is better." Satisfied, Mephistis dragged her into the bedroom and threw her onto the bed. Then he snagged her hair again, twisting her head around. "Are you going to doubt me?"

"No." Margren cringed as he struck her across the face.

"Do I love you?" He hit her.

"Yes! Yes, you do."

Mephistis kept on until his rage began to fade and then he sat beside her, took her in his arms, and began kissing her tenderly. "You're not going to make me angry again by doubting my love?"

"No. I will never doubt you." Margren snuggled against him, tears running freely down her face.

"That's much, much better." He continued kissing and stroking her. "I am the only one who truly loves you. The only one who can protect you from your sister."

"I know it."

Then he made love to her.

\* \* \* \*

Laurelyanne and two servants came instead. They quickly cleaned the mess. Laurelyanne moved Tamlestari to a comfortable chair and changed the bedclothes as

well. Aejs stood in the doorway with a sheepish grin, shrugging helplessly whenever Tamlestari looked at her.

Aejs leaned against the door facing and took out her pipe, smoking thoughtfully. When they had finished, the Valdren mage had tucked Tamlestari into bed once more with a quick pat to her stomach, and then they left. Aejs went back in. The lapsed paladin pulled a chair and small table close to the bed, settling in with a sigh.

"You have at least a month of this, loyal heart," Aejs told her. "Most of that we will be traveling."

Tamlestari stuck her tongue out with a frown. "I can learn to vomit well past the side of a horse."

"More likely you'll vomit before getting on the horse."

"That too."

"It might be better if you rode in the wagon with Eli."

Tamlestari frowned angrily, "Never! I'm ha'taren!"

Aejs pulled the pipe out of her mouth, smiling in agreement and appreciation. "I love you." She bent and gently kissed Tamlestari's stomach. "I love both of you."

Tamlestari settled against the pillows, a look of contentment on her face. "You will be a very good ma'aram."

Aejs moved to the bed, sitting beside Tamlestari, "I intend to be. No more riding off to war when I should be home teaching my children the arts of maturity." Aejs bent, her mouth meeting Tamlestari's, her hands reaching for her lover's breasts.

Tamlestari moaned softly as Aejs found all the right places.

\* \* \* \*

Dane watched Mephistis brush his fingers across Isranon's brow lightly, not enough to waken him. His eyes were narrowed with concern as he snugged the blankets around his young friend. He worried. Any other sa'necari would have long ago been healed. For over a week since his wounding, Isranon had not been fully conscious. He would rouse to a semi-conscious state and feed when a nibari shoved their wrist in his mouth, only to slide away again. Dane had been able to get only a little of the Sanguine Rose, an extremely potent troll's blood cocktail of drugs and herbs which only the highest echelons of the vampire royals knew the secret of making, into Isranon. Sometimes he muttered, "Rose."

The prince turned to Dane standing behind him and gestured with his head that they

should withdraw. Dane took the branch of candles from the nightstand and followed Mephistis out, allowing the room to go dark behind him. The vampire set the candles down and returned to close Isranon's bedchamber door.

Mephistis paced the room.

"She says she did not stick him."

Dane rubbed his chin, trying to mask his incredulity. "And you believe that?" He finally said in a flat voice. "Two of those blades were poisoned. Sa'necari do not poison their blades, they rune them. Death Lotus and hydra venom. Hard things to come by, and yet..." Not hard for someone like Bodramet and Dane had seen him and Margren talking too often together. Bodramet could have provided them to Margren.

"No. However, there's no way to prove it without breaking her mind. I made her too strong. I will not do that." Mephistis paused, to regard Dane with eyes gone hard as stone. "I need her fully aware and in one piece. I will not make a meat puppet of her the ways you vampires do."

Dane nodded. "The room was crowded, she could have been among them. He is strong of will. Stubborn. But someone knows what he is. Who he is. No one wants him, Mephistis. The Light does not want him. The Darkness will not have him. Not even the nethergod would allow him to live. He is anathema to all creation. What can you possibly be thinking? Let him die. It would be a kindness." Despite his words, Dane did not wish Isranon to die, only to see the youth's suffering at an end, certain that only death could bring him peace and escape – unless he could convince Isranon to come away with him, and he knew already that the youth would not.

"I did not ask your opinion, vampire. I said, heal him."

Dane smiled thinly. "So be it. But once he is well, my people and I are leaving. This last episode has been too much."

\* \* \* \*

It took two days of wheedling and teasing and talking and threatening, but Tamlestari finally got enough out of Aejs about her meeting with Tehmistoclus to become furious.

"Who the fucking hell does that priest think he is?" Tamlestari shouted, pacing back and forth.

Aejs, sitting in the window chair, shrugged. "Knew you'd react this way," she muttered.

"What?"

"I didn't want to tell you, Estari... You didn't exactly leave me many options..." Aeajys said, half apologetic, half exasperated.

"Huh! You should not have had any!"

"Estari, it would be better if you calmed down first," Aeajys suggested. "We're guests here... You can't go storming the temple."

"Oh, can't I? If he doesn't back off I'm going to kick his High Holy Ass up between his ears," Tamlestari said, lowering her voice but still bordering on shouting. She turned her back on Aeajys, stalking to the stairs. "And I mean it."

Aeajys just nodded: she had run out of words.

Laurelyanne, who had been listening at the bottom of the stairs, jumped out of the way as Tamlestari raced past and out the door. The old mage stood shaking her head in the prince's wake. "It's been a centuries since anyone really took a swing at Tehmistoclus," she mused, mostly to herself.

"She'll do it," Aeajys said, drawing Laurelyanne's eyes to the head of the stairs. "I wanted to tell him that he was dealing with a Sharani hellion, not some sweet, innocent young girl."

"He would not have appreciated the information..." Laurelyanne said, gravely.

"Then let him learn the hard way," Aeajys laughed suddenly and Laurelyanne joined in.

"The hard way. Yes. Yes. Yes," Laurelyanne laughed, adding, "This time I'd say he deserves his lumps."

\* \* \* \*

The gardens around the temple were already beginning to brown under the chill autumn weather and the priests were scattered throughout, gathering in the last of the herbs they grew, their green robes bright against the brown. Their movements were slow and thorough, completely at peace until Tamlestari arrived. She stormed down the walk, through the browning privet hedge, and into the gardens.

Spying the nearest young priest, she marched up to him. He stood instantly, straightening his robes with a flick. "You there!" she shouted, grabbing him by collar and pulling up on his tiptoes.

The priest flinched, dropping his eyes in confusion and dismay. "Yes?" he queried softly.

"Just where the hell is Tehmistoclus," she screamed in his face, "and who the hell does he think he is sticking his nose into my relationships?"

Priests looked up from their gardening, some leaning on their baskets, others settling cross-legged with lapfuls of various herbs, to watch her. Other than that no one moved, but everyone in the courtyard heard her. It would soon be all over Vallimrah, passing from village to village, that the High Priest had blundered and endangered the Promise.

"Please," a soft-spoken brother in brown robes touched her arm lightly to get her attention. She spun, releasing her captive with enough force to send him tumbling to hands and knees. He quickly scampered away, disappearing rapidly into the temple.

Tamlestari glanced significantly at the hand on her arm before knocking it away when the newcomer did not move fast enough to suit her. "What do you want?"

The brother winced. "To take you to Father Tehmistoclus."

"About time!"

\* \* \* \*

As soon as the door opened, the brother who had brought her fled. Tehmistoclus rose from his seat in his study and greeted her. "My lady," he said softly, "You wish to speak with me?"

"I want to know what right you have to be interrogating my lover?" Tamlestari demanded, her face still flush with anger. "Who I sleep with is my business and no one else's!"

Tehmistoclus paled a little before her anger and straightforward speech. What he had expected the princess of Vallimrah to be like was nothing like what he found. The small, furious warrior in tunic and trousers with the steel rose of the Odarens embroidered on her shoulder, her short black tipped hair held in place by a beaded head band, was clearly a woman to be reckoned with and not the delicate young girl that most Valdren women were at her age. He realized that it had been a mistake not to become acquainted with her before taking Aejs to task about their relationship. There was no longer any question in his mind that Tamlestari would not allow anyone to take undue advantage of her, even in their speech.

"Did Aejs try to tell you about your ma'aram?" he asked quietly, waving his hand for her to sit.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Tamlestari reined her temper in enough to stop shouting and sat down.

He joined her. "Perhaps you should discuss this child and your choice of mate with

your ma'aram," Tehmistoclus suggested diplomatically.

The flush faded from Tamlestari's fair skin. She felt as if reality had just dropped out from under her as the implication of his words sank in. "Kalestari? But she's dead."

"That, my child, is a matter of definition." Tehmistoclus's expression relaxed as he re-took control of the conversation. "You know the tale of her death? Of how Aurean the Golden, Queen of the sa'necari of Waejontor, changed into a dragon before the gates of Sharatier? Of how your ma'aram put aside her mortal form and challenged her as a fireborn?"

"Yes," she said quietly, "I have been collecting the stories of her. My amita was going to write a history of her. I intend to finish it."

"An admirable undertaking. Then you must know the parts that only our people know. The fireborn blood is strong in your line. As is the dragon blood among the royal line of the Waejontori. The dragon fire and the phoenix flame filled the night. When the battle ended Aurean had died and your ma'aram lay mortally wounded. But dying, she had fallen behind the Waejontori lines..." The lines in his face deepened then with pain and anguish. "Before we could break through..." He exhaled heavily. "One of their initiates had taken mortgiefan, the death gift, from her. Do you know what that means?"

Tamlestari paled, all the anger draining from her face, replaced first by horror and then outrage. "They raped her as she died," she said bluntly.

The old priest winced at the steel in her voice. "Damaging her soul ... draining a piece of her ... making the initiate more powerful." For just an instant tears seemed ready to form in his ancient eyes, then were gone as he recovered himself. "But when they came to prepare her for burial her body had turned to ashes."

"That much I know. Then even the ashes vanished. There is nothing buried in her grave."

"Then know the rest. Two of our people stole her body and left the ashes in its place. The surviving half of her soul rose again from the flames of Mt. Queleyus when I cast her body into them."

"My ma'aram is alive?"

"Yes." He patted Tamlestari's hand sympathetically. "But because of that initiate's theft, she can never take mortal form again."

"His name! The initiate's name!" Tamlestari demanded through gritted teeth, her hand dropping to her sword hilt, caressing it dangerously.

The question, gesture, and sound of her voice startled him. Tehmistoclus had expected her to ask about her ma'aram first. Truly this youth was made of steel. "Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan, Prince of Waejontor. A most powerful sa'necari."

"When I find him, he's dead," Tamlestari growled. "Now. Can I see her?"

"If you have the courage to climb the peaks around Mt. Queleyus you may even speak with her."

Tamlestari gave him a curt nod, rising from her chair and stalking out with the pride and threat of a young lion hunting.

It took the old priest nearly an hour and two glasses of potent liquor just to stop trembling: Tamlestari frightened him. The promise, if compromised, had not exactly been broken. But if Kalestari chose to tell her daughter everything that was within her rights. And if Kalestari did so then maybe the young woman could be dissuaded from her ill-conceived alliance with Aejystrys brye Rowan.

\* \* \* \*

"Now that I am convinced you love me, Margren..." Mephistis paused, watching her flinch. "It is time for you to cross the line. Tonight you will have mortgiefan."

Her face brightened at his final words. Mephistis smiled thinly. Clearly she thought he had intended to beat her again. That was very good. He had her nearly trained and always off guard as to whether it would be pleasure or punishment he dealt out.

Two drained bodies lay at their feet in his parlor. For the past two weeks he had allowed her to feed upon blood alone with only a little wine between meals. She was ready. He rose, extending his fist for her to place her hand upon and led her out as if she were a Waejontori woman and his property. Margren did so with a small swallow, accepting the humiliation that was intended. Despite it all, her eyes burned with eagerness. Soon she would cease to be human altogether.

"I have everything set up in the shrine for a ritual of hecatomb. We will feast on sacrifices and you will learn new things."

Isranon stood just outside the door in the corridor as Mephistis had ordered him to. He nodded at Margren with carefully schooled neutrality. Mephistis noted how weak and pale Isranon still looked. The prince would have preferred for the youth to be resting, but Isranon was stubborn and insisted upon being allowed to serve as soon as he could walk without collapsing.

"A rite is planned," Mephistis told Isranon, pausing for an instant. "Have the remains of our dinner removed and then do as you wish until we are finished."

"Yes, my prince."



Margren's lips inched up, showing her fangs and then subsided when her eyes met Mephistis' glance.

He nodded, and led her along the corridor to the Altar of Hecatomb. Mephistis had promised her that she would become one of the most powerful of all time. But he had lied. She would be powerful, yes. Perhaps even as great as Bodramet or Mephistis' brother, King Baaltrystan of Waejontor who ruled the remnants of free Waejontor from a castle hidden in unreachable mountains of the far north. But among the most? No, she interpreted that to mean nearly equal to himself and no one would ever be the equal of Mephistis. The Waejontori prince had taken a thousand times a thousand mortgiefan, many of them from foes of incredible power such as the fireborn warrior Kalestari Havenrain.

Mephistis had no peer. He was the paternal grandson of the most powerful banewitch of all time, Aurean the Golden, Queen of Waejontor, whom Kalestari had slain in the battle of Sharatier. Shintar, his sire, had beget him and three of his four brothers on Aevrina Coleth, the only known Sharani banewitch – there were others still undiscovered – who had in turn kyndied him and his brothers into the womb of Aurean more than doubling the necromantic power of his bloodline. His fourth and oldest brother, Baaltrystan, who now sat upon the Waejontori throne, was a product of incest between Shintar and his mother, Aurean. Of the four brothers, only Mephistis and Baaltrystan had been born sa'necari: a very rare thing, since most sa'necari were made not born. Estopholes, the middle brother, had been made sa'necari only a few years past; while Farendarc, the youngest brother, a duelist, was now dead, slain by Aejys Rowan last summer. Farendarc had been no loss: Mephistis felt nothing for any of his brothers.

One single act had placed Mephistis beyond all others in power. The Legacy of Waejonan, the dark magics that sustained Waejontor, passed from parent to child in unbroken succession through an act of mortgiefan perpetrated on the parent by the child. The power should have passed from Aurean to her son, Mephistis' father, Shintar. But Shintar had died before her. The power should then have passed to Baaltrystan. Mephistis, however, mounted the dying Aurean and stole the power for his own. One day he would mount his brother and ride him into death. Should the one who carried the Legacy ever perish by the arts of the lifemages, then Waejontor would perish also.

\* \* \* \*

The Mountains of Qua almost completely encircled the high meadows and plains of Vallimrah and many of the highest peaks were active volcanoes from which the great birds called fireborn drew magical sustenance. The largest volcano, Mt. Queleyus, had not been active in a decade and a lake now filled its crater. The volcanoes never erupted, for the fireborn drained their heat by bathing in the molten depths. Mountain ash, rowan and red Valdren laurel grew from Queleyus' steep side, sticking straight

outward and then bending upward to catch the sun.

Three people climbed the mountain paths on foot. Laurelyanne led. They traveled slowly for Aejs' side bothered her and Tamlestari was still experiencing morning sickness. What should have taken only two days at most, took nearly five. For three days they had heard the cries and calls of the fireborn as they wheeled in the sky above them.

As dark came Laurelyanne decided to halt at a small cleft in the mountain's side. "It is not much farther to the shrine," she told them, "but I do not want one of us stepping off the side in the dark."

Aejys lowered herself down, using the staff. Pain and exhaustion etched deep lines in the lapsed paladin's face. Although she did not complain, her condition was evident to all. Tamlestari knelt beside her, took her wrist in hand and read her.

"That cracked rib does not belong climbing mountains," Tamlestari admonished her.

"So you've told me." Aejs pulled Tamlestari closer and kissed her. "I'm an old campaigner, Estari. I've climbed mountains with far greater wounds than this."

"And a cracked rib. That wolvesmon must have hit you hard."

Aejys sighed. "He did. Knocked me out of the saddle and into a tree. I felt like the blade when the smith puts her hammer to it."

Tamlestari made an appreciative noise, cuddling closer to Aejs.

Laurelyanne got a small fire started and put her little kettle on for tea.

"You both know what I will learn up there, don't you?" Tamlestari said.

Aejys and Laurelyanne looked at each other for a moment and Aejs said, "Yes. I think we do."

"Then tell me," Tamlestari said.

"It is not ours to tell, child," said the mage. She handed Tamlestari the first cup. They ate bread, cheese, and dried fruit.

\* \* \* \*

The shrine was a small stone building. Three priests lived there year round and kept a herd of goats. When the three myn arrived, one priest was sent to light the tall oil lamps before the seeing pool to signal that the fireborn were needed.

"One will come to us in the morning," a priest told her.

They could see one of the distant volcanoes spitting fire and ash. The fireborn would soon be bathing there to still it. The huge forms of the fireborn flew over them several times that day. The birds were almost as large as the great drakes, with hundred foot wingspans. Their wings were brilliant magenta shot through with gold, their bodies a deeper shade of red turning almost violet where it met the azure feathers of their bellies. Their crested heads were slender and elegant.

Tamlestari stretched out on her back in lush mountain grass and watched the fireborn fly overhead. "One of those is my ma'aram," she said in a distant, thoughtful voice. "All these years... I still cannot believe it."

"Nor I," said Aeajys sitting beside her. "When Kalestari died, I wept. Both for her loss and what I feared it would do to our land. The Lionhawk was a brilliant general, but nothing compared to Kalestari. Many of us were appalled when the Saer'ajan banished her. We didn't know then it was a ploy to cover her quest for the Moonstone of Reyanon."

"And she returned in time to save the capital."

Aeajys nodded. "And die." A great sadness entered her voice. "Too often the great ones buy our victories with their lives."

Tamlestari reached up and touched the corner of Aeajys' eye, feeling a wetness there. "You are a great one, Aeajys Rowan."

"No," Aeajys said, "not I. I'm just a lapsed, pudding head paladin with her emotions too often on the surface these days."

"Tag calls you that. She isn't right, you know."

"Tag sees a lot deeper than most, my love. I was happy as a simple tavern owner. It's pudding head paladins that take on archenwyrms with a bag of fireworks."

"But you killed it."

"It wasn't me. It was Josh. Tag and I screwed up. We didn't get the bombs close enough to do the kind of damage we'd planned. Josh got drunk back at our camp, and then followed us. He got a bag of left over fireworks burning good, tied a long rope around it. Then while the wyrm was busy slamming me against the cave wall he wrapped the bundle around its neck. It exploded. Blew the wyrm's head off."

"That's why you take care of Josh, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Aeajys, then laughed suddenly as she remembered it all. "The skull landed on top of me. For a moment I was swimming in wyrm brains. Gods! I never

thought I would get the stench off! It took days and days of determined scrubbing! It didn't help that I had managed to break my fool leg when it slammed me either."

\* \* \* \*

The fireborn landed beside the seeing pool at the first hour of dawn. Tamlestari gasped sharply as its form shimmered and changed. In a moment a young mon stood before her in garments of gold and scarlet. His eyes were the color of flames and had no whites. The old priest bowed reverently.

"Lord Calain, the mortal daughter of the fireborn called Kalestari has come seeking her ma'aram's wisdom."

"This one?" he asked in severe tones, as he looked Tamlestari over.

"Yes, lord," Tamlestari said, "I carry a child and would have her advice concerning it. I – I thought she was dead."

"She will not be able to change as I have," he said. "Will that upset you?"

"No, lord, it is enough to know that she lives and can speak with me."

He stretched out his hand and grasped Tamlestari's. "Let us go inside and speak of this. Then I will have a better idea of what to say to Kalestari. She has only once agreed to speak with mortals. That was when the Valdren Queen herself came." He turned to the priest, "Do you have those sweet cakes you used to bake, Lameris?"

Lameris' old face split in a smile. "Always, Lord."

"Good! I will enjoy some. I have been away a long time, for there is evil growing again in the north and I was sent to learn of it. I missed your sweet cakes, for no one else has quite your knack."

They followed the fireborn back into the building. As they settled in at the priest's long table, Lameris went after cakes and wine.

"You should know that your ma'aram spent the first few years among us keening for her loss. Then for several years she spoke to no one, not even others of the fireborn. Now she has begun to be one of us. It might not be easy for her to see you. She could refuse to come."

Tamlestari could not conceal her disappointment and Calain patted her hand. "It might not be that bad. Tell me your story, everything you can think of."

So Tamlestari talked of her love for Aeijys, of her childhood and her dreams, anything she could think of that might make her ma'aram come down and talk to her. When she finished, Calain smiled.

"Yes, there is much you two have to talk about. I will find her and ask her to come. If she will come it will be tomorrow at dawn. If she will not come, I will return at that time with her reasons."

\* \* \* \*

The next morning there were two fireborn beside the seeing pool. Calain took his mortal form, but the other remained unchanged. He came, indicating that only Tamlestari should approach. Then he had the others follow him inside. Aejs understood that Kalestari would wish to be alone with the daughter she had not seen in over ten years. But at the same time she felt saddened not to speak with her old friend.

It was nearly evening when Tamlestari returned. Her face had an odd, thoughtful look and she carried in her hand a talisman of a golden fireborn in flight.

Aejs went to her and slipped her arm around Tamlestari's shoulders. "Are you all right?"

Tamlestari nodded. "I know who I am. I know what is expected of me." She gave a very tiny smile and the impish light stole back into her eyes. "But ma'aram says to hold out as long as I can. Live my life on its own terms."

Lameris frowned. "That might not be wise, highness," he said. "There are things you must do for your people's sake."

"I agree," Calain said insistently. "I told your ma'aram as much."

"There are many things I need to learn and to experience – things that I will not find here, Lord Calain," Tamlestari replied, extending the amulet so that all could see it. "This is, as you should all recognize, Quadenlas. One of the three artifacts of Eldarion Havenrain. She has the other two. When my children... Aejs," Tamlestari looked up into the lapsed paladin's astonished face, "we're having twins. When the children are old enough to be brought to her I am to bring them. Then she will give me the sword, Quatarl. And when they come of age the shield, Quademerial. One of the children will need them. She showed me that in the seeing pool."

Aejs thought for a moment as her arms went around Tamlestari, drawing her close. She buried her face in the younger woman's hair as a chill ran down her spine. What did this mean? "Why? Why will our child need these things?"

"Because, if we do not stop Margren's lover, Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan now, our child will have to." Tamlestari pulled away with a pensive light in her green eyes. "Now I think we should start back."

"But it is nearly dark," protested Laurelyanne.

"Quadenlas will give us light," Tamlestari said, settling the chain over her head.

\* \* \* \*

They stayed two more days after Aeijys and Tamlestari returned from Mt. Queleyus. Queen Magdarien met her great grandchild and found Tamlestari to be as stiff necked and willful as her ma'aram and grandmother had been. At Tamlestari's suggestion, Valdren messengers were sent to their people in Armaten bidding them be watchful on Laeoli's behalf. And a company of Valdren rangers assigned themselves to accompany Tamlestari to Rowanslea. Laurelyanne prepared to come also.

## CHAPTER TWELVE. HUNTING THE HUNTERS

A suggestion of frost gilded the morning mist lying over the streets of Armaten as guardsmyn wrapped in heavy woolen cloaks shoved open the great steel banded oaken gates. People, camped outside the walls overnight, waiting for dawn, stood and gathered their belongings. The sounds of drivers and hostlers rose with the crack of the reins and the straining creak of wagons and carts as their horses threw their shoulders forward against their harness to get them moving. The last of the season's harvest was heading for the city's granaries. A long merchant caravan, returning home for the winter, followed the grain carts into the city. A scattering of travelers on foot and horses moved alongside, around, and behind as they jostled for their chance to get in without further waiting. Over the next several weeks many would come in while fewer and fewer would leave. The mountain passes would not close up for several weeks yet, but freak storms, although rare, were not unheard of. With five weeks left before solstice, only the hardest and desperate took chances with the mountain weather.

Talons re-entered Armaten through the massive stone and heavy oak main gate. Rumor had been flying for weeks that Wilstryn Hornbow had been slain and secretly buried by one of her business rivals, a woman with ties to Aeijys Rowan – Talons knew where those rumors were coming from since outside of herself, the Urchins, and her grandsire, only Margren's people knew Wilstryn was dead. Rumor could kill as easily as a Guildsmon's blade. So the guards were justifiably startled when Talons stepped through the gates in the guise of Wilstryn Hornbow. Since the costume and cosmetic illusion would not hold up to close scrutiny, Talons discretely kept her distance from them.

She turned down the wide main street, striding quickly into the Market Square, giving everyone a clear glimpse of her. A nervous crowd watched her warily, many moved from her path to stare. Wilstryn the arms merchant was well known and, coming on the heels of a series of murders and other suggestions of gang or factional warfare in Armaten, her sudden return from the dead appeared as a distinctly dark omen.

Fifteen people had died in a two week period, their bodies left in the center of the market square, eyes and throats torn out by something or someone with claws. All of the slain had been from the middle class, the artisans, and minor merchants without enough rank to demand attention singly, but taken together more than enough to create panic. The entire city was frightened and clamoring for action from the city's Baron Annalyn Wrak. But, short of declaring martial law, there was little the Baron could do.

There had been more deaths than those Talons had left in the square: the Urchins found the bodies of three of Talons' Guildsmyn while scampering through the trash heaps in search of random salvage. Talons buried them in the forest with Birdie, priest-in-training to Dynanna, speaking the rites for the dead. Talons took out the shifters who had taken their place, but she knew their deaths had been too recent for their replacements to be the traitor or traitors she sought. She and Zarim, Birdie's sire, threw the shifters bodies over the walls into the temple grounds, hoping that a priest would Read them revealing the Waejontori taint Lizard swore was there. But they dared not go openly to anyone outside themselves. When no word emerged from the Aroanan temple, Talons looked for other options.

She had begun keeping one hand under her cloak, claws out, using the runes on them to pick her victims: She could feel them grow warm and then hot in the presence of dark magic.

"Ma'aram!"

Talons glanced at the familiar voice and saw Laeth Hornbow, almost as storkish as her ma'aram, pushing through the crowd toward her. Talons let her get closer, felt her claws warm and cursed: had she flexed her claws but once in Wilstryn's home, Wilstryn would be alive; but she had considered it both bad manners and bad judgment to bare her weapons without need in a friend's home. She ducked down an alley, found a spot of deep shadow along the edge of a back building amid a pile of broken, discarded furniture, and shrouded herself.

Laeth paused in the alley mouth, dropping a hand to her sword then moving deeper into the alley. Every few steps she paused still and catlike, seeming to sniff the air, searching with all her senses for the threat she knew was there. Her blade slid smoothly from the sheath as Talons slipped silently into the light.

"You're not Wilstryn," Laeth stated coolly. "Who are you? What game is this?"

Talons smiled, serene, calm and centered. "Who are you?" She shook back her cloak, summoning both claws. "Traitor!"

The other laughed. A dagger flashed at Talons' midsection. Talons deflected it casually, stepping in, and then darting to the side, her claws raking the shifter's dagger hand, leaving pieces of some fingers hanging from strips of flesh and others

severed completely.

The shifter shrieked, a high-pitched animal noise of pain and rage, striking at Talons like a darting serpent with her blade.

Talons danced away, sensing each move the shifter made, playing with her. She avoided the blade, letting it come within inches before twisting slightly, catching Laeth on the back of the hand, shredding it, forcing her weapon from useless fingers. She kicked Laeth in the side, slamming her against the wall, and then took her eyes. Laeth dropped into a screaming heap amid the broken furniture, clutching her shredded, bleeding orbs. Talons straddled her, a knee hard in her back, jerking Laeth's head back hard by the hair, exposing her throat. Talons put her claws to Laeth's throat. The runes, burning with white-hot intensity, seared the shifter's flesh wherever they touched.

"Who are you?" Talons hissed through gritted teeth.

Laeth laughed, a harsh sound that grated on Talons' ears and sent a shiver prickling over her skin.

One torn hand, bare white bones showing through the shredded skin, gripped Talons' hand at her throat. Pain seared through the assassin and up her arm as if reaching for her heart. Her vision grayed, yet she could see the creature's skin closing over her bones, the wound sealing up as if it had never been there. Talons felt as if her veins had opened and her life was draining away.

"Sa'necari!" Talons gasped, reeling. She lost her hold on the creature's hair, the long black locks sliding through fingers that could no longer grip. She tried first to shove her right claw into the sa'necari's throat and then to pull free instead, but the grip on her wrist was like iron. The sa'necari's fangs extended, sinking hard into Talons' wrist. Her claws vanished and her knees gave. Talons struck the ground and lay still. The sa'necari bent over her, nuzzling blindly at her throat, her long pointed tongue finding the artery. As the sa'necari's fangs entered the favored vein, Talons rallied, fighting back from the engulfing darkness. She summoned her claws and shoved instinctively upward with both hands. The rune claws plunged deep in the creature's heart, stopping it instantly. With a shrill, despairing cry, the sa'necari fell dead across the assassin.

As Talons' consciousness slid away into darkness a realization came to her: Wilstryn's two eldest daughters, Laeth and Sorrow, had gone to Dragonshead, mapped it, and found their slain brother. The shifters followed them home. The map was true. Margren's people would not have wanted that in Wilstryn's hands, but probably did not know about it. Wilstryn's daughters must have died that same night and been replaced by the shifters: but only after giving the map to Wilstryn. That meant there was one more key shifter to deal with: the one wearing Sorrow Hornbow's form.



\* \* \* \*

"Now that's a grim tale," Blackbird said, sitting on a ragged over-stuffed chair in Birdie's tower room, shielded by the magics of Dynanna. "So what have you decided 'bout Sorrow? And the other daughters?"

"I've never tried to take someone alive..." Talons said softly, thoughtfully. "I'm a killer ... I don't take prisoners. We need information. Grandsire needs captives to question. Several I killed were Waejontori. I have guesses. A wrong step would be disaster. For all of us."

"There are a whole lot of those Golds out there." Birdie added, her voice dropping to an uneasy whisper, "What if there are more sa'necari?" She sat beside the altar, her knees drawn up, and her head resting on them. "You don't want a shifter coming back in your skin."

"Just so," Talons agreed coolly. "Grandsire will not send anyone into the city until I've cleansed our ranks." Talons played with a dagger, pulling, sheathing, and pulling in a casually preoccupied manner, thinking through the situation, her gesture punctuating each turn of her thoughts. "Too dangerous. Too much magic. When I am the only one of our people left here, then he will send me help."

"You need some help now and Birdie, here, knows where to get it," Blackbird said. They had had this conversation several times since Talons returned from executing Laeth Hornbow's shifter: Nothing more remained to be said.

Talons nodded, leaving the dagger sheathed this time. "All right. Count me in."

Blackbird nodded at Birdie, who rose, beginning the invocation to Dynanna.

Mist rose around the altar, forming into a small, translucent, slightly misted figure sitting cross-legged before the loot box. The God was not much taller than Birdie, wore a loosely laced vest with no shirt, revealing ample well formed breasts, and brocaded knee pants split three inches on the sides.

Talons had never before encountered a group of Dynanna worshippers, although the troubles that Dynanna could get folks into – and out of – were both legion and legend. She never expected the God to actually appear; such things being rare to both her experience and knowledge, she half-considered a discrete withdrawal, then, realizing the God was staring straight at her, knew it was too late for that.

"We need at least one alive, your Sacredness," Birdie said respectfully. "And help taking out the rest."

Talons stared, uncertain of what action to take, letting her instincts rule. Her stone-killer composure blanked her face; whatever came of this she would deal with.

"What are you offering me?" Dynanna asked seriously, "Besides lifelong devotion, utter affection and kisses?" She wrapped her arms around the youth, kissing the startled Birdie full on the mouth before pulling back with an impish grin.

Talons shook her head at this; Dynanna was like no god the assassin had ever heard of. She watched the misted quality depart from Dynanna's face, revealing an upturned pixie nose, high well-formed cheekbones with delicate hollows beneath and full lips that seemed to promise trouble.

Birdie motioned toward the loot box. "Take whatever you want."

Dynanna chewed thoughtfully on a corner of her mouth, bending over the box and poking through it, she pulled out a few oddments, sticking them in one of her many voluminous pockets. Then she started staring at Talons again. The God sauntered over, looking the assassin up and down. Talons felt those eyes undressing her boldly and stared coolly back, despite, for the first time in her life, an urge to bolt. Dynanna threw her arms around Talons, settled onto her lap and kissed her soundly. Talons stiffened, the kiss burning on her lips like the touch of the kyndi. According to many priests of many gods, Dynanna's unpredictability and uninhibited impulsiveness made the little trickster potentially one of the most dangerous deities in their world; far beyond her stature as a very minor young god – a yuwenghau. She was also homegrown, one of a tiny handful of Daveranan entities to find full godhead since the advent of the foreign gods who imprisoned the Hellgod, Bellocar, behind the vast Katal Escarpment northeast of Shaurone.

"Loosen up a bit," Dynanna urged, sounding a trifle petulant, her mouth pouting. "You might like it."

Talons sighed, Dynanna's remark about affection and kisses rotating in her mind, and wrapped her arms around the God, sliding into her embrace.

"OOH! This is definitely better!" Dynanna kissed Talons expertly, her hands moving along the young assassin's neck, then down into her shirt, opening it. "Twice bitten, third time you die," Dynanna murmured so low Talons was not certain she had heard it. "You don't want this to show," Dynanna added, her eyeteeth lengthened, but with her face pressed into the juncture of Talons' neck and shoulder, no one saw. The godling's teeth entered through the same wound left by the sa'necari. Searing pain filled Talons' body as Dynanna sucked hungrily. The terror of her encounter with the sa'necari, the living embodiment of the undead, mere hours past and screamingly vivid in her mind, Talons' felt herself teetering between panic and madness. Her body no longer answered her will: she could not shove Dynanna away; could not summon her claws and strike; she could not move even to speak or scream. Weakness spread through her, she sensed death's approach, Hadjys ... Hadjys ... my soul ... then her eyes rolled up in her head and she fainted.

Dynanna lowered her gently to the floor, "Scares hell out of them every time," she

murmured, lifting her bloody mouth. Dynanna wiped her mouth on her hand and her hand on Talons' shirt. Birdie gave a shriek, tumbling backwards into the corner, wedging between the wall and the altar.

"Not as good as a vampire," she said flippantly, "but more thorough than a hickey."

Blackbird's eyes were wide. "What did you do?" she croaked. She could hear Birdie weeping, wanted to go to her, but the crippled old knight was just too frightened to move, too aware that Dynanna was an immortal and of how far she was from the days when she was whole and strong.

"Oh, I'm not a vampire or anything." Dynanna shrugged, enjoying the joke even if the others did not. "Just made her think I was. I like doing that to the strong ones. Time it takes'em to faint's a good measure of character. Considering where she got that first set of marks, she's got a whole lot of courage too."

Birdie crept out to Talons' side, wincing at the still bleeding wound in her neck, she found the pulse point above it: Talons' heart beat as strongly as ever, but Birdie promised to have Lizard read her just to be sure.

Dynanna knelt, touched the wound: the bleeding stopped. The fang marks were now an odd squiggly scar, almost a silvery question mark: a godmark. "Marked her as mine. I'm not possessive or jealous, understand, so that shouldn't be a problem for her. The Dark Judge isn't a jealous god either," she grinned broadly, "otherwise he'd've been after my ass a millennia ago. I've marked a helluva lot of his." She went momentarily thoughtful. "Course he's marked some of mine... My favorite, Pieface's got both marks... Had a helluva fight with him over that one... we ended up in bed together after... He certainly knows what he's doin' there." The yuwenghau shook herself like a dog shedding water. "We got us three kids ... an' I still won't marry'm. I'm just not the marryin' kind, ya know. Only see each other when we got a mad on ... mostly."

She reached across Talons' limp body, grasping Birdie by the shoulders, pulling her close. "Ma'aram, you should leave now," Dynanna said.

Blackbird started to protest.

Dynanna rounded on her. "This is a very big favor you're asking. I don't normally cross Bellocar this way. Try to stay out of the Big Ten's path, I do. One of them could stomp me into the ground so fast ... but they'd have to catch me first." A shrewd, smug smile stole across her mercurial face, and then she waved at Blackbird. "Go! Scat!"

Blackbird glanced at Birdie who nodded that she should go. The old knight rose heavily on her good leg and left, closing the door behind her.

Dynanna pulled Birdie into her arms, feeling the usually bold, sassy youth trembling

like an aspen leaf in a hard wind. She kissed the top of Birdie's head, shifting her to arms length. "You've always asked for little favors before, my girl," Dynanna spoke gently, trying to be encouraging. "This is a big one. We're putting both our butts on the line. Bellocar's initiates spent a long time preparing this move. It's a nasty one. His backup plan is even nastier ... this isn't the time to go into that one. Prepared to go all the way?"

Birdie nodded.

"When we finish, you will be my first high-rank Sharani Priest. Can you handle that?"

Birdie nodded again, straightening defiantly. "I can take it."

The room filled with the intense sweetness of roses from distant shores and ages past. Birdie felt an odd stirring in the center of her being, a longing for something she could not name that seemed mixed of both serenity and quiet joy. As she watched Dynanna's shape misted, faded in and then out again: It was not clear whether she had phased out and this new god in or whether she had become this young male taller than Birdie with long blond hair as thick and wild as a lion's golden mane. The yuwenghau's clothing misted away, showing a narrow waist, broad well developed shoulders and well hung genitals quickly growing erect.

Birdie knew then what was expected of her: she would give her body to the God, for his pleasure. She shivered, hugging herself, struggling to master the fear crawling through her stomach. At thirteen she was that rare thing for a Sharani: a complete virgin. She had never wanted anyone sexually except Lizard who never seemed to notice her in that way. She had wanted just him and only him since her tenth year when her menses came and brought desire on its heels. She loved Lizard passionately with all of her heart and all of her body. Lizard should have been first. Her promise to the God to give her whatever she wanted in exchange for her intervention, aid, and protection had just taken Birdie's choices away from her. And yet, staring at the pale perfection of the young God's body, she felt a wetness form between her legs, a need she was only half willing to acknowledge even to herself.

He glanced from Birdie's bed in the corner farthest from the altar, then to the tremendous pile of pillows and cushions spread along the wall between them. Finally he ran his eyes over the sweet curves of Birdie's young body, the round generous apples of her high breasts, the broad flair of her hips and the dark thick thatching between her legs. In a single stride he reached her, scooping her easily into his arms. Birdie trembled hard in his muscle-corded arms, turning her face into the juncture of his chest and shoulder, inhaling the scent of roses that clung to him. He carried her to the pile of cushions, lowering her gently.

"I'm called Dynarien," the yuwenghau explained. "In my first incarnation I was a prince who died for love." He slid Birdie's shirt up over her head, helping her to free

her arms, then stroked Birdie's breasts lightly, teasing her nipples to hardness and drawing a low moan from the youth. "How old are you now?"

"Thirteen last spring," Birdie murmured softly, finding speech difficult beneath his touch, wanting only to make small animal noises. She unfastened her trousers, sliding them down and opening her legs to him, waiting. He pulled her trousers completely off, tossing them in a far corner.

"How delicious." He kissed her lips lightly, his tongue teasing and tasting the edges of her mouth. "You Sharani! You are so sexually precocious! Have you had many lovers already?"

Birdie shook her head, the quivering in her loins growing intense.

"I want more than just to make love to you, Birdie," Dynarien spoke softly, licking between her breasts. "From this joining you will conceive. Do you want my baby?" Dynarien ran his tongue over Birdie, lingering on her nipples, which hardened again at his touch. "You won't have to kyndi this one if you don't want to."

"I – I don't know..." Birdie swallowed back a sob; both the God's desire and the intense sensations of her body frightened her for a moment. She had dreamed and fantasized about sex, but not about pregnancy. Despite the sexual precocity of Sharani youths, they rarely became pregnant at thirteen: the kyndi protected them until it was ready to manifest – usually around fifteen when they came of age. Her hand slid down to press her stomach, wondering what it would be like to feel it swelling and as she did her hand brushed his hard maleness. A tingling rush of excitement set her trembling.

"This is a very special child. I've been looking for someone special to give him to." Dynarien bit her left nipple playfully, bringing small flecks of blood around it.

Birdie yelped, pushing him back "Not so rough!" she protested, defiance rising past her fears and the desperate longing of her body to feel him inside her.

Dynarien laughed, kissed her deeply and thoroughly, then began stroking her again. "One of the greatest Valdren heroes. Found his soul in a bottle. He'll keep you and yours very safe. You'll see."

He bent over her, lowering his weight carefully onto her. The pressure of his body stirred an odd, but not unpleasant feeling in the pit of her stomach. Her trembling changed to quivering anticipation as she felt his cock pressing lightly, teasingly against the lips of her womanhood.

"Do you want him? Do you want me to come inside you? Feel how hard I am, how ready." Dynarien brought Birdie's hand to his cock, letting her feel it.

"Yes," Birdie moaned. "I want you."

Dynarien kissed her as he entered, thrusting deep and hard. Birdie cried out sharply in pain as her hymen tore, hot sticky blood ran down her thighs. Dynarien, without pausing in his thrusts, levered himself up to stare incredulously at the blood

"Virgin? To both genders?"

Birdie, weeping at the pain tearing at her, managed to nod.

"Oh, my poor, sweet Birdie," Dynarien murmured, thrusting more slowly, more gently, finding a kinder rhythm. "It only hurts the first time..." And how appropriate, a very young, completely untouched virgin to bring Eldarion Havenrain back into the world again. He stiffened suddenly with a moan, rearing back as his seed exploded within Birdie, filling her.

Eldarion Havenrain's soul curled contently in the soft, warm darkness of Birdie's womb to sleep and dream, to wait for birth and a time when he could once more take the field against the Waejontori.

\* \* \* \*

They lay together a long time after the child passed to Birdie. Then Dynarien left and Dynanna returned. Birdie had a quick glimpse of them standing together for a moment talking too softly for her to hear. Dynanna lay down beside her to stroke and pat and make small comforting noises: she had never dreamed that Birdie, child of the streets and twice as savvy, was so totally untouched. She glanced at Talons. Maybe I should have given the child to her? Nah! Eldarion Havenrain does not belong in that Guild.

She made a couple of tries at cleaning Birdie up, but the youth slapped her away each time and Dynanna gave up: Blackbird would probably take one look at the bloody mess between Birdie's thighs, the bruises Dynarien's initial roughness had left, and throw the altar out the window. It would take a tremendous amount of help and booty to get Blackbird to look the other way on this one. The more she thought about it, the more items she summoned into the room; stuff piled up quickly until it was pushing at their feet as well as the ceiling in places.

Dynanna wondered idly how long it took human women, especially Sharani, to start swelling. "You could kyndi if you don't want to carry him... But my sources say that adds something they can't predict to the sum total of things."

"If I don't kyndi?" Birdie asked thoughtfully, starting to recover some of her confidence. "Won't he be born azdrin?" The sterile, genderless, disenfranchised hermaphrodites and androgens held in contempt by Sharani society.

"Nah. He'll be born perfect, no kyndi required."

"Ishla would know. You could ask her."

Dynanna levered herself up on her elbow. "And let one of the Big Nine," she left out all reference to the Gods of Light whose ruling pantheon Ishla was part of, "know what this wee godling was up to? Uh Uh! Tried to shut me up in a cave after I cursed that dwarf family with ten generations of six foot children."

Birdie giggled.

"Birdie, my sweet wild child, you sure you can handle this?"

"I can handle anything!" Birdie started to bridle.

"Okay," Dynanna said, growing thoughtful again. "Pointers. He's a mage, warrior, and magical smith. Get him some good teachers. And... hmnn, make him streetwise as hell. No pampering, no overprotecting. Don't make him a wuss."

"What's his name?"

"Can't tell you. This has got to be a fresh start."

Birdie thought about that. "But won't he remember?" She rubbed her belly as she spoke, trying to feel the child inside her.

"Don't think so. All his powers, skills, instincts, that kind of stuff, will be intact though."

\* \* \* \*

Dynanna smiled, purring with pleasure at the thought of what a kink this child would put in the Hellgod's plans for the next generation. She had spent much of the last century uncovering various lost soul vaults of the Waejontori necromancers and then figuring out just whose souls she had and which gems they were in. She still had three more heroic souls to place, but had not yet found the right wombs. At least she was getting as much pleasure out of placing them, or Dynarien was, as she had hunting for them. But what she really wanted was the entire contents of the soul vault at Dragonshead, a place she had never been able to break into, where legend had it were stored souls from before the Renewal, followers of the old gods and just maybe an old god or two.

\* \* \* \*

Half the day had passed before Blackbird got up the courage to check on her daughter and Talons. She opened the door with trepidation. The heady overpowering scent of rose hit Blackbird in the face the moment the door opened halfway. It's too late in the season for roses ... her practical mind thought first and magic second. With the door thrown fully open, Blackbird could see the room was

covered in rose petals like a thick layer of blue snow. She hesitated to step on them, thinking for a minute to take off her boots, and then reminding herself – she sometimes forgot how things she once did easily, without a thought, were now difficult such as trying to get her boots on one-handed – because she let it impinge as little as stubbornly possible on her daily life – that she would never get them back on without help.

Talons still lay sleeping, a blanket thrown thoughtfully over her and a second blanket of rose petals over that. Birdie lay on the cushions, huddled beneath a quilt. Blackbird saw her clothes discarded beside Talons and her heart skipped a beat. She had known for a few months now of Birdie's obstinate virginity; Birdie had always confided the secrets of her heart to Paunys, her wombmother; and Paunys, slowly dying of an incurable degenerative disease, knowing she would not live out the winter, feeling that she had to leave some protection behind for the youth, confided those secrets in turn to Blackbird. She knelt beside her daughter, started to turn back the quilt, but Birdie resisted.

"Stop that!" Blackbird ordered sternly.

Birdie released the quilt; Blackbird flipped it back and gasped at the bruises rough sex had left on her daughter's body, at the blood crusting her thighs, the thick mass of congealing seminal fluid. "This is too much!" Blackbird roared, "I want that altar out of here!"

Birdie caught at her ma'aram. "No. I asked for it. I'm her priest now." She did not mention the pregnancy, which could wait until there was no hiding it.

"Look!" She waved at the altar. There stood three swords and shields; a mountain of spell cords for binding magic and killing; a pile of strange nets made of silver and spun as soft and supple as silk but stronger than the strongest steel; a box of darts and a blowgun; a silver bow and quiver of arrows; and a stack of pie pans with small holes in their rims (a Badree Nym weapon that reputedly could take the head off a stone troll before returning to its wielder's hand as well as being a very fine cooking vessel). Blackbird went to inspect this incredible pile of loot when she noticed several large chests buried beneath the stuff. She carefully moved things around until she could open them. Three of them were filled with gold coins; two with gems of every description, most of them rare beyond dreaming; and the last with rings, amulets, wands, scrolls and spell books, none of them in anyway identifiable at first glance. "Holy Shit Come Calling!" Just as she thought she'd seen it all, her gaze fastened on a vial of dark blue liquid with a note tied around it.

Birdie's Ma'aram:

This is for your mate. One spoonful daily for three days. May the three of you have a long life together.

Perverse Dynanna



Blackbird gasped in wonder at this last, certain that it could only be the Sapphire Elixir of Idyn, and clutched the vial to her heart, muttering, "A cure for Paunys?" Hope and fear warred for a moment in the old knight's heart: hope that this would cure her dying na'halaef and fear that it would not be what she thought it was. She rushed down the stairs. Paunys' bedroom lay just off a short corridor on the west end of the house. Blackbird paused at the door to catch her breath before entering.

The room was dingy and ill lit with a single oil lamp burning on a small table beside the bed. Zarim, their ba'halaef sat in a threadbare chair, spooning broth into Paunys' mouth. Zarim was a Jedruan, black skinned with a tight cap of dense curly hair, a large expressive mouth and a broad nose. Paunys and Blackbird purchased him at the Sharani slave market before the war, influenced largely by his people's bedroom reputation, but after a handful of years had freed and married him.

Paunys rested against pillows piled up to support her back and shoulders. Her disheveled hair, black until just six months past, was a waxy gray. The flesh hung loose on her gaunt face with a grayish-yellow tinge to her skin.

Zarim looked up and shook his head, indicating that Paunys was no better, and his face so sad it broke Blackbird's heart. They both knew that Paunys would not see their twentieth anniversary on winter's solstice.

"Give me the spoon," Blackbird said, moving him gently aside. She opened the bottle, poured out a spoonful, and lifted it to Paunys' mouth. Paunys gave her a questioning look: she had tried dozens upon dozens of elixirs and backwoods granny remedies, some of them pretty awful, without success. Blackbird did not argue, just let her eyes plead for her. Paunys sighed wearily and swallowed.

As they watched in wonder, the color came back in their mate's face, her eyes brightened, and the fever glaze left them. They came together, hugging and weeping, giving thanks to Dynanna while Birdie and Talons went forgotten.

\* \* \* \*

Birdie made the run with Lizard as backup just as they had done with Ladonys in case things did not go as planned. She had never killed anyone, but she had long ago made peace with the possibility. The decision had been made to draw Sorrow and her allies out into the open, force them to respond in numbers to a perceived threat that would bring them within Talons' reach: no more cat and mouse. She wore a brace of daggers in arm sheaths and another pair in her boots: Their goal was simply to touch Sorrow's bare flesh with the spell cord wrapped around Birdie's left hand and laced through her fingers, making it a grim, potentially deadly game of tag and run.

They spied Sorrow in a crowd along Silversmith Street. Small and physically immature for her age, Birdie darted through the crowd like a slim dark shadow, felt in

passing but taken no more notice of than the average street child who was always running after something. She took a few purses as she went, more from habit than need in light of Dynanna's generosity. She came up beside Sorrow so quickly and quietly the shifter did not notice her, until Birdie's shoulder deliberately caught her in the side, staggering Sorrow an instant before giving her the boot to her hip. The shifter hit the ground hard, rolling onto her side. Ordinarily Birdie would have fled at that moment; instead she lingered, their eyes meeting, locking together like duelists in the instant before their swords engaged.

Anger burned in Sorrow's glance at the humiliation of her fall into the dirt and garbage strewn street. Dust from the brick paving streaked the woman's long narrow face. "I know you," Sorrow hissed. "I know where you live. Don't mess with me."

It took all the will power Birdie could muster not to follow her street-trained instincts and simply flee, as she would have had the collision been accidental. Deliberately, Birdie spit in Sorrow's face, completing the insult, provoking the mon past thinking, "Shifter shit!"

Several things happened at once: the shifter reacted faster than Birdie dreamed possible, faster than anyone the youth had encountered in her thirteen years except Talons. Sorrow grabbed Birdie's shirt, yanking her off balance and down into the dirt. Birdie hit the ground hard, staring up into Sorrow's savage glare. She sensed, rather than saw the blade slide into Sorrow's hand, twisting instinctively so that the blade caught her side instead of her stomach, opening her from just under her ribs to hip, deeply enough at the top to split all the layers of skin and fat, revealing her insides, and going shallow where the cut ended against her hip bone. Dizziness and a burning pain swept over the youth as her blood rushed out to soak her shirt and pants. For just an instant fear paralyzed her, then Birdie's street-honed instincts kicked in, taking over her body and reactions. She shoved her left hand into the shifter's face. The spell cord sparked as it touched the shifter, leaving a burn scar across Sorrow's face. The shifter screamed, releasing Birdie and dropping her blade to clutch at her face.

A crowd had gathered, watching curiously, but doing nothing to intervene because they all knew the thieving reputations of the street children, especially the Urchins. Birdie rolled to her feet, darting toward the crowd, intending to put a good distance between herself and the shifter's allies. A hard, calloused hand closed on her arm, jerking her off balance. Birdie looked up into the leering face of one of the assassins. She kicked out, catching the mon's shin hard. The mon grunted, thumbing a large ring on her finger. A needle appeared, coated green with some kind of drug or poison. Birdie screamed, thrashing violently. "No! Noooo!" Her shirt tore away in the mon's hands, Birdie twisted loose just as the needle ripped through her arm.

"She won't get far," the mon muttered at Birdie's retreating back.

Birdie fled, passing up the nearest alley, pursued by two of the shifter's

companions. Her arm and side burned with a terrible intensity. Her running stride had become a staggering walk. The world started to go gray around her. The familiar streets no longer looked familiar, nothing looked right anymore. Was it the second alley or the third she was supposed to go down? Where was she? Was she even in Armaten anymore? Her head was so heavy. It would be so easy, so very easy to let herself fall and not get up.

She began sucking air deep into her lungs, trying to shake her head and body loose from the deadly lethargy overtaking her. She turned into the next alley. Too late she realized she had gone into the wrong alley: there was no help waiting for her here.

"Little bitch!" A tall mon chasing her cursed, "Cheap little gutterscrew!" As soon as she stepped into the alley out of sight of the general throng, she drew her blades, knives as long as short swords.

The alley was a dead end: a crumpling garden wall blocked her escape. Birdie sprang at the wall, catching the top edge, scrabbling to get over. Her weight pulled at the bleeding wound, sending a sharp, unrelenting pain through her. Birdie lost her grip, falling hard onto her left shoulder, the impact knocking the breath from her lungs and the feeling from her shoulders to her fingertips. The pain banished some of the drugged fog from her awareness although for several moments she could not move, her lungs sobbing for air, with great effort she dragged herself into the corner of wall and building, drawing a dagger with her right hand.

"Dynanna. Dynanna," she chanted desperately, unheeded tears sliding down her cheeks as she stared at the two Golds who were going to kill her.

The second mon entered behind the first. "Give her to Margren? Or gut her here?"

The first mon's form blurred, then cleared, becoming a large male with violet, white-less eyes. "Let's enjoy her first, we don't get much fun in this god-forsaken realm."

Birdie clutched her bleeding side with her left hand while her right rubbed her stomach where the special child nestled in her womb. Surely Dynanna would not let her die, if only for the sake of the child. She lunged, slashing at the first one to reach her, but Birdie's reflexes were off and she missed the mon's stomach. The sword came back at her. Birdie ducked, her drug-impaired balance failed her, and she fell, losing her dagger. Instinctively, she rolled away, causing the shifter's blade to strike short of her. She rose on one knee, glancing quickly around herself: she was nearly at the end of the alley, there was no place left to run. She drew the dagger's mate from her boot, only to have it knocked from her grasp with the flat of a blade. The shifter seized her, dragging her off her feet, and then slamming her down onto her back slicing the lacings of her pants open. Birdie thrashed wildly, screaming imprecations and curses as his weight crushed the breath from her lungs, his knee forcing her legs open. The Waejontori shoved himself into her savagely, tearing at

the soft tissues of her womanhood with his member until blood oozed around him.

Feeling had begun returning to her left hand and a blade slid into it, only to have the second warrior step on her wrist, forcing it from her fingers.

"My turn," said the second mon as the first's seed spilled into her.

Again the mon's shape shifted and Birdie found herself staring at a second male with violet eyes. Then the second one was on her, pinning her slender body with his weight as he entered. A long shrill scream broke from her. The second one drew his blade, putting it to her throat as he thrust rhythmically within her. She closed her eyes, turned inward, grieving for the child that would not be born.

The scent of roses filled the alley. The Waejontori paused to glance around them uneasily, recognizing the presence of magic. A strong pale skinned hand caught the Waejontori riding Birdie by the nape of the neck, yanking him off her, his seed fountaining against the nearest wall as the yuwenghau shook him with the careless power and fury of a large dog with a small vermin in its mouth before slamming his face into the side of the brick building. With a sickening crunch, the Waejontori's nose shattered and his forehead cracked. He slid down into an insensate heap as Dynarien released him.

"This is not allowed!" Dynarien snarled.

"Bastard! Gutterscrewing Bastard," cursed another soft, familiar voice with more emotion than Birdie believed possible. "Fucking cockwhore!"

Birdie fainted, too weak to fight whatever it was, drug or poison, raging through her body, wondering in a last flare of fading thought whether she would wake again.

Talons, claws out, took the eyes of the nearest Waejontori, then stood staring into Dynarien's eyes with cold calculation, measuring and assessing what it would require to take him out. "Who are you?"

"A friend," Dynarien said gently, his eyes guileless as a child's. He gestured at the Waejontoris, spell cords materialized out of the air, moving like snakes to bind the shifters. "The Urchins are coming. Birdie needs help."

Talons approached him cautiously, looking from her prisoners to Birdie's prone, unmoving form. "Who are you?" she repeated.

"The Rose Warrior," he replied enigmatically. Dynarien snapped his fingers and vanished in a shower of blue rose petals of every shade that could be imagined.

Talons scooped Birdie into her arms, tears running down her otherwise impassive face. "Forgive me. I should have kept a closer eye on you."

A shout went up from the roof above them. Sparkling silver nets hurtled from the roof toward them, clinging like spider silk to Talons' victims, imprisoning them. The harder they struggled, the tighter the nets held them.

Ropes dropped next. Six children scrambled down, followed by Zarim, their sire. They quickly secured their captives.

"Birdie?" Zarim questioned anxiously.

Talons slid a significant glance over the other children. "Not here."

Zarim nodded grimly. "At the house..."

Talons nodded.

"There's more of them," Birdie murmured, reviving in Talons' arms.

"They're off chasing Lizard, Jysy, and Arruth," Talons said as Birdie slid away into the darkness again. She settled Birdie against her shoulder; they had to get out fast.

"Birdie?" Zarim asked again, touching Talons' arm.

"I can't tell yet, we need to get out of here." She seized the nearest rope, going up quickly.

\* \* \* \*

Talons got a field dressing on Birdie's wound in the concealing shadows of a large chimney. Organs and entrails bulged against the parted flesh. Talons pressed them back inside as she tightly wound a length of bleached linen around Birdie's waist, grateful that only the skin had been cut. Then she noticed the torn sleeve and the blood there. She ripped it completely, casting the cloth aside. The puncture wound and the longer scratch rising from it. "Shit!" She parted the lids of Birdie's eyes, saw they were dilated and the whites had an odd yellow cast. The assassin knew of at least one drug and two poisons that could do that. Talons pulled the small vial of blue crystallized powder from her belt pouch, pouring a tiny bit into her hand. She rubbed some of it into Birdie's gums and nostrils where the membranes could absorb it. If it were a drug, the Amphereon would help her shake it off. If it was poison – with the Grand Master's quarantine on Armaten – Talons doubted she could find the antidote in time. "Pray it's not poison," Talons muttered, shifting the youth into her arms and starting on. Only Lizard could tell them that.

\* \* \* \*

Lizard chased everyone out before he sat down to Read Birdie's wound. His face was typically Sharani bronze skinned, with a wide forehead and high, broad cheekbones, tapering down a delicate jawline to a small dimpled chin, and not a sign

of facial hair. A Reader, he had gotten some training from an itinerant herb-healer who had begged Blackbird to give Lizard to her as her apprentice, but Lizard had refused and Blackbird accepted that: he wanted to remain with the Urchins and Birdie. Now he was the main healer to the ills that periodically afflicted the Urchins.

Talons had told Lizard and only Lizard about the rape. He would have known anyway when he cleaned her up. It brought tears of anger to his eyes, but he had fought them back, ushering Talons out with the others. He found no poison, just a wound and something else he had never sensed before, it beckoned him, called his awareness deeper. Slowly it dawned on him just what he had found. He laid Birdie's wrist down, drawing back and sucking a deep, shaking breath. At least the embryo seemed too well nestled in its place to have been the result of the rape.

"Lizard?" Birdie reached for him and he moved away. "What's wrong with you?"

Lizard kept his back to her, fighting for his voice, feeling hurt, angry, and worried all in the same moment. "Should I kill him? Or step out of his way? Or did you kyndi for a friend?" No, he felt that the last could not be true; the kyndi would have left traces.

"Who?"

"The sire, Birdie. The SIRE!" Lizard spun back to face her, tears streaking his face. "If you wanted a child ... you could have asked me!"

"Dynarien is the sire," Birdie said quietly.

"Never heard of him... Who is he?" Lizard's voice grew a little steadier.

"I can't tell you. Make any assumptions you like."

"What do you mean? Did he force you?"

"No. But I can't tell you unless I have your word no one will ever know... It's a – a priestly secret."

"Dynarien?" Lizard's eyes grew huge, his quick mind catching the similarity between Dynanna and Dynarien. "Dynarien's a God? Isn't he?"

Birdie nodded. Lizard sank to his knees beside her bed, listening in wonder to what happened in that very room. Somewhere in the middle of the tale, he picked up her hand, holding it to his lips, kissing it distractedly while she spoke. What neither of them realized was that there was a second child only hours old, hidden behind the special one, not yet presence enough for Lizard's limited experience to detect. The kyndi's protection, disrupted by the God's fertility, had failed her and she had conceived a second child in that alley where she was nearly killed.

\* \* \* \*

When Lizard did not reappear by supper, Blackbird began to pace and worry. Talons insisted on being the one to go up. Talons opened the door, stepping quietly into Birdie's room: if Lizard was fighting for Birdie's life, she did not want to interrupt him. She did not see Lizard anywhere. Puzzled she moved closer, noticing that there seemed to be two bodies under the blankets. A smile stole over her usually grim face. She moved to the side of the bed to affirm her suspicions: Lizard and Birdie were asleep in each other's arms.

"Old enough to fight and die, old enough to love," Talons quoted the Sharani proverb under her breath. She withdrew as quietly as she entered, going quickly down the stairs. Blackbird accosted her at the base. "My daughter?" she asked anxiously.

"Just fine," Talons answered, smiling enigmatically.

"Then why hasn't Lizard come down?"

"Have a look," Talons replied, inclining her head. As Blackbird mounted the stairs, Talons' called after her "Quietly. Very quietly."

\* \* \* \*

"They'll come tonight," Blackbird said, hammering the shutters closed on the front windows, then bracing them with a strong iron rod. The children held the shutters in place while she hammered, moving from window to window.

"Aren't we going to do Birdie's?" Zarim asked, coming down from the second floor.

"Nah," Blackbird said, giving him a wink. "Dynanna told Birdie to stay up there with the window open. Got a surprise for them."

"They'll come in the hours just before dawn," Talons told them, "when folks sleep the deepest."

"Rather thought that," Blackbird remarked.

"I'll go out now," Talons pulled her cloak around her and slipped through the front door into the night. "I don't know how many there will be, so you had best be on guard in case any of them get past me."

"You can count on that," Zarim said grimly and Blackbird nodded.

\* \* \* \*

They descended on the big house in the poor quarter from every side in groups of threes and fours. Secrecy was no longer necessary: Birdie's touch to Sorrow's face had revealed their nature to the crowds, who were already figuring out what it meant. Once done here, they would return to Dragonshead while Margren and Mephistis figured out if this effort could be salvaged.

A first floor window in the rear looked badly sealed. The tallest of the trio, a broad-shouldered Waejontori male got his hands solidly on the bottom corner of the rotted boards, ripping it open. The smaller of the other two was a Sharani woman with a long facial scar and the second a tall, lean Vorgen man who had once been the go-between for the Golds in Vorgensburg and their Waejontori masters.

Scar Face entered the room quickly as the others followed. She crossed to the door and had her hand on the knob when she felt the hard, steel-like fibers crawling up her legs. "What the fucking shit?" She reached down to touch it, knowing it was too late in the season for snakes, and the fibers leaped to snag her hand. "Holy Mother of Hell!"

She staggered, ripping her hand loose, feeling skin and muscle torn away as the price of a moment's freedom. She tried to run, falling instead as the fibers lashed around her thighs and tightened like slender chains.

The sa'necari raised his hand, calling light. It filled the room and he saw his companions downed by silvery nets crawling as if alive over their bodies. His foot was still inches from the first one, standing in the small cleared area immediately around the window. He cried out every word of command he knew as a casual magic user, as so many of his people were. Laughter made him look up. Straddling the ceiling beams were three small children, none of them more than nine-years-old. They held more of the silvery nets, twirling them expertly. "Stupid children!" he shouted, calling fire to burn their small bodies to char. The nets met the spell as they dropped, turning it back on him and he screamed as his flesh crisped beneath the silver bonds pulling him to the floor.

\* \* \* \*

Birdie curled up in the middle of her bed with the blankets pulled to her chin. She patted the comforting chunkiness of the hard-rock maple cudgel lying alongside her thigh. This was definitely not her kind of fight, there was very little room to move around in the tower, and certainly not enough to escape if need be. On the street she always had her retreat planned, just as she had when she grabbed Ladonys' pouch that day. Her tactics had always been strictly hit and run, not stand and fight unless absolutely forced. With Blackbird's crippling and Paunys' degenerative disorder, there had never been anyone to teach Birdie the hardcore arts of combat. Zarim could fight in a pinch, but, to her knowledge, he had not been trained either.

Birdie's fears, heightened by her wounding and rape earlier that day, were swiftly



accelerating into outright terror when she heard the soft chink and scrape of a grappling hook catch her window.

"Dynanna?" she whispered nervously, her eyes darting everywhere. "Where are you?"

A soft chuckle answered. "I do love surprises."

Birdie looked again, but there was no other sign of the yuwenghau – the young rogue god. Then she saw the hands on the sill as two tall myn with strange violet eyes heaved themselves in.

Birdie yelped, snatching her cudgel out.

"That's the kid burned the captain," the first one muttered, drawing a long bladed knife.

The second one climbed in behind him. "Kill that one," the second said. "I'm going down stairs to get the rest of them."

The room filled suddenly with the scent of roses. The pair halted, glancing quickly around them.

"Hello!" said a bright male tenor.

The Gold Ravens spun, drawing and lunging.

Dynarien wore golden armor as bright as his long red-blond hair, the device on his breastplate, an eagle rampant with blue roses in its claws and circling it.

"Weren't expecting me, were you?" Dynarien laughed, pulling a long golden sword from the sheath at his shoulder.

They moved apart, forcing Dynarien to split his attention between them. With a laugh, the godling lunged full out, skewering the nearest one. The second man took that opportunity to stab at Dynarien's back. The godling leaped high, spinning and coming down behind his foe. He straightened instantly, turning calmly on the assassin. "Over here!"

The assassin turned. "Shit! What the hell are you?"

"Ooooh, now that would be telling," Dynarien chuckled. The assassin turned to flee and Dynarien's golden blade plunged to the hilt into the assassin's back. As the mon fell, Dynarien muttered distastefully. "I'm not a back stabber as a rule, but turnabout is fair play, they say."

A low moan from the window drew his eye. A third Waejontori hung limp half-in

half-out of the window, his head a bloody ruin. Birdie stood over him with her cudgel, blood and scalp tissue clinging to it. "Got one," she gritted grimly.

"So you did," Dynarien said proudly, stepping toward her.

Birdie dropped her cudgel, throwing herself onto Dynarien. The godling nuzzled her soft hair, murmuring, "Dear sweet Birdie, I've earned my reward, don't you think?"

"Yes."

"After what happened... I was a continent away... I came as fast as I could."

"I know."

Dynarien bent, pressing a tender kiss to her young lips and was just starting to embrace her when a splintering crash made the entire house shake. He drew back from her, heading swiftly for the door. Birdie grabbed her cudgel and followed him. At the head of the stairs he turned, ordering her firmly, "Stay here."

"Yeah, right," Birdie gave him a defiant sidewise glance.

"So be it," he said, his voice heavy with resignation and concern, "but stay behind me."

\* \* \* \*

Blood and gore coated her claws, two blades were missing from her bandoleer, as she stalked the next small band, she would go back for her blades when this was ended. By her count there were six left and one of those was Sorrow. Ahead of her four scouted the house, looking for their way in.

"Something's out there," whispered the nearest one. "I can feel it."

"You're just nervous!" muttered the next one. "Imagine, Torys is scared of children and a cripple!"

Talons smiled coldly, coming silently behind Torys. One hand snaked out, clamping vise-like over Torys' mouth as her claws took out the mon's throat. She lowered her quietly to the ground, fading back as her companion returned.

"Torys?" this one whispered, "Where are you?" Her foot connected with her late companion's body and she stumbled, going to her knees. She stared at the dead face of her companion, limned in moonlight.

"Shit! There's someone back here. She got Torys!"

"Yes, I did," whispered Talons in the mon's ear. The mon started, drawing steel.

Talons took her eyes first, letting her cries escape to draw her companions. Then she slashed her throat, nearly taking her head off.

One came forward, sword drawn, the second stayed back to strike a light and set a torch flaring. Talons faded back still more, waiting in the shadows of a corner building.

"Children didn't do this," the third one muttered, kneeling beside her two dead companions. "Neither did that cripple Blackbird."

"This is like that one got the others in the Market Square... They've got a pro helping."

Yes, they do. Talons sheathed her claws, drawing a pair of blades. The first caught the torchbearer dead center, a clean kill. She keeled over, the torch guttering out.

The fourth turned to run, but Talons' matchless night vision let her put her next blade in the woman's back. The woman staggered against the wall and Talons was on her, taking her eyes and then her throat.

"Now there's just Sorrow," the assassin muttered as she turned back toward the house. A resounding crash shattered the night, coming from the direction of the front door. In any other part of Armaten that noise would have brought armed people crowding from their houses in response to their neighbor's danger; but in the poor quarter, no one emerged, if the denizens reacted at all, it was to cower down and hope whatever it was did not turn in their direction.

Talons threw caution to the winds, thinking only of the children and the debts she owed them for their aid, which had placed them in this danger. Moonlight limned the giant form in the shattered doorway. Talons recognized it from drawings and the descriptions of others: nearly nine feet tall, bending to enter through the twisted remnants of the door frame, stood a broad, long muzzled, blue-green skinned stone troll.

"Hadjys Nine Hells! How do I fight that thing?"

"They regenerate," said a small voice beside her. "Gotta give'em a wound kills faster than they can mend."

Talons, repressing a startled movement before it took form in her muscles, looked down: two of the children stood there, accompanied by a third that she sensed was not a child despite its diminutive size. Mysten, one of Blackbird's "add-ons," war-orphans never officially adopted and Tomlyn, the one of her twins, extended a long rope of braided spell cords to Talons.

"Thought this might help," the third small person said, doffing an over-large slouch hat to expose his red hair and enormous pointed ears. "Pieface at your service,

military attaché and advisor," he said seriously. "I'm an observer, not a participant. Now you'd best take that cord and get in there before they all get killed."

"Badree Nym!"

"Yup! Now get movin'."

\* \* \* \*

Blackbird did not know what the enemy might throw at the house, but from hard learned experience during the war, especially the incident that crippled her, the old campaigner preferred to assume that whatever it might be would be equal to the best they could block it with, Talons included. Therefore a little over compensation might be called for.

Most of the children she sent to the root cellar with Paunys, knowing any she kept with her would probably die: Paunys had not yet regained her full strength, but had been a noted swordsmon in her day. Blackbird prayed that Paunys would be able to deal with anything that got past those in the front room.

In point of fact, she grimly counted everyone in the front room with her as already dead: her crippling and the war had evolved a hard philosophy in the woman, that of assuming you were dead and then trying to take the enemy with you.

She stood before the front door, wearing a shield bound like a breastplate around her chest and useless right arm, holding the sword that matched it at the ready, both taken from the gift hoard of Dynanna. Blackbird would never be as good with her left hand as she had been with her right, but she had worked hard for many years to compensate.

Zarim, displaying an unusual stubbornness, stood behind her with a large spiked club, insisting he had trained with one as a child before being captured and sold into slavery. Blackbird loved him intensely as did Paunys. Although they had purchased him as a mere love slave, the quick witted, glib black man from Jedrua had found a deeper place in their hearts – deep enough that they risked losing him by setting him free. He had promptly moved into a separate bedroom and made the two women court him formally, after the Sharani fashion: the result had been Birdie.

Blackbird tried not to think about all of that, but could not quite suppress it. "It's a good day to die."

Lizard, who had taken up another of the paired swords and shields, held a position near the long table in front of their tattered couch. Before his sister's death in the war, she had trained him a little; just the basic moves, not enough to call himself a swordsmon, but for years afterward he had practiced those small movements in secret; and while one part of his mind said it would not be enough, another part prayed it would be – for Birdie's sake and the child he had claimed as his own.

The first impact on the door startled everyone, but Blackbird gave them a nod that said, "Stand easy, wait." They watched the door splinter and crack, giving on its hinges and the thick oaken bar Blackbird had nailed into place, as something huge beyond their imagining rammed it again and again.

Then it came through.

Blackbird intercepted it first. "Stone Troll!" she shouted, identifying what they had never seen before. She opened a long gash in its arm before it backhanded her across the room. Blackbird struck the corner farthest from the couch hard, her head impacting with a sickening thud and she slid down, settling into a sitting position, unmoving.

Zarim, after twenty years in Shaurone, remembered very little of his mother tongue, having been barely in his teens when he was captured and sold by slavers; yet seeing his beloved Blackbird fall, triggered deep memories: he gave a long ululating warcry of his tribe and charged in. He got in three blows with his spiked club, two to the troll's face and another opening a long gash in its arm before it hurled him to lie unmoving at Blackbird's feet.

Jysy and Arruth, in the rafters, dropped a long corded rope made of spell cord around its neck as they leaped down. Gravity and momentum in their favor, they yanked the beast off its feet. Quickly they secured the rope to a spike driven into the floor. The troll thrashed about, but its neck was too thickly muscled to be in any danger of strangulation from the cord. All that it seemed to do was enrage the creature. Jysy gave Arruth a nod and they charged in with their short blades out. But they only got in a couple of cuts before a lashing kick sent them tumbling into a knot, falling together, motionless into the east corner of the room.

Then Lizard came in, his sister's meager teachings serving him. He batted the troll's arms aside, driving his blade into its guts. But he was in too close, too fast and the beast caught him in the chest, flinging him back, across the long table. Darkness claimed him as he struck the table to lie across it as still as death.

Talons entered the fray last. The troll was too large, almost as broad as it was tall, for her to reach its eyes or throat in her usual fighting style. She had heard many tales of encounters with the stone trolls from the veterans of Jon Dawn's Legion, and it always came down to a single fact: a lone warrior never successfully took out a stone troll, except for a few isolated cases in which the outcome had been a mutual kill – both opponents dying.

She twisted under its arm, trying to dance as she had with the bear. Give it a wound kills faster than it heals, she thought grimly. The only way to do that was to simply go in and kill it in a suicide run. She ducked under its swing, closing with it swiftly. The assassin had mere seconds to strike before it killed her. Her left claw sank deep into its chest, reaching for its heart. The beast struck her hard in the chest. She heard

her ribs break. Agony ripped through her. A piece of her left upper rib ripped through the flesh of her back, protruding from her clothing. Awareness grayed out, yet she would not let go. She drove her right claws into its chest, striking and pulling at its heart. It struck her in the stomach, rupturing her liver and kidneys, yet she hung on, dying. With a hard twist, she kicked free of the creature, falling to the floor beneath it with large chunks of its heart hanging from her claws. The stone troll convulsed and hung still – as still as the young assassin crumpled at its feet.

\* \* \* \*

Paunys emerged at Pieface's heels with the sapphire elixir bottle in her hands. The sight that greeted her sent a chill down her spine, knotted her stomach, and tightened her throat. No one moved or seemed to breathe in the room. The first thing she saw was the great stone troll hanging dead from the rafters. Blackbird was crumpled up, half sitting in a far corner opposite the worn old couch. Zarim lay at her feet. Lizard draped the table, face down and unmoving. Jysy and Arruth were a tumbled knot of stillness in the far east corner. Talons lay torn and bleeding beneath the troll, a piece of her shattered ribs jutting through her back.

"I'm glad you brought that," said a soft, male tenor.

Paunys glanced around to see Dynarien and Birdie standing a few feet behind her. "Birdie's defender..." she murmured.

"She told you?"

"Always does."

Dynarien nodded. "Come on ... before one of them dies." He strode past her, dropping to his knees beside Talons. He brushed the bloody hair from her face as he cautiously turned her on her side before raising her up. Her head rolled limply against his arm. "Talons," he said sharply. Getting no answer, he felt for and found her struggling pulse. Dynarien placed his hand over the silver question mark at the base of her neck. "By Her Mark! I command you, Talons, wake!"

Talons groaned, her eyes opening.

"Good." Dynarien extended his hand to Paunys who put the bottle into it. He poured a little into Talons mouth, but the assassin was too weak to swallow it, so he massaged her throat, triggering an involuntary swallowing. Color seeped back into Talons' face and her pulse steadied. "Those ribs will need to be set and she'll hurt like hell, but she's out of danger now. Blackbird next." He handed the bottle back to Paunys. "Send Mysten and Tamlys for the guard. Give them one of the prisoners in the north room, hide the others. I'm leaving with Talons, I'll return her when the guard has come and gone." He rose to his feet with the assassin in his arms, disappearing in a swirl of blue roses.

\* \* \* \*

The dead stone troll, the shifter's true form, proved too much for the frayed nerves of the citizens, the city guard, and the Baron. They doubled the guard, widened their patrols, and clamped down hard on everything, declaring martial law. The next day rumor spread widely despite the clamp down, tying Margren and her followers firmly to the violence; this in turn set off episodes of vigilantism, especially by the lower classes. Although Armaten burned, Margren was stopped in that city.

Dynarien sent Talons, still far from healed, Birdie, Lizard, Blackbird, Jysy and Arruth to Rowan City to start the fires burning there with the admonition to take it to the heart of the city, Castle Rowan, if need be.

\* \* \* \*

While his people were packing up to leave Dragonshead, Dane showed Isranon where he had buried Rose. Isranon settled beside the grave, which Dane had concealed with stones and debris, took out his flute and began to play his saddest songs.

"I am sorry, Isranon," Dane told him. "I tried and I failed you."

Isranon shook his head, continuing to play.

"Listen to me..." Dane pleaded. "Isranon, since you will not come away with me. Should you ever be forced to flee, there is an estate near Charas. Ask for Haig or Zulaika. They know where and how to find me. They will help you."

"I never should have fallen in love." Isranon lowered his flute. "Love is not for such as I."

"You're young, Isranon. Too young to be saying something like that. Will you accept my offer of sanctuary should you need it?"

"I don't know. I doubt it."

"Why not?"

"I accept that the sa'necari will eventually kill me, like they did my father and his father before him. That's always how it ends for us. I feel in my heart that I will never be given a chance to flee."

"Don't say that. Say only that should you flee, you will come to me."

"I will try." He turned away from Dane and resumed his playing, closing the vampire out. Isranon heard them ride away, the sound of their horses' hooves thudding on the soft earth until it faded from his hearing. The leaves rustled and he looked up to

see Juldrid emerge. She settled by the grave, placing a sprig of mistletoe at its head.

"I'm sorry for your grief," she said, venturing her first freely given words to him in all those months. "I know you loved her."

Isranon lowered his flute. "More than anything. I swear I will never love again. I will never put anyone at risk because of what I am."

Juldrid nodded, sucking air through her nostrils while chewing on her lower lip.

Isranon could see that the first faint swelling of her belly had become noticeable.

Juldrid followed his eyes. "They are mine as well as theirs. Had I a hope of escape I would take my children where Mephistis and Margren could never find them."

"And if they are born sa'necari? What then?"

"Then I will find someone to teach them to be like you."

"I cannot help you, Juldrid. I cannot betray my prince and run away with you. Besides, I know nothing of these lands. How would I protect you?" He felt his helplessness more keenly since the gauntlet brought it home to him. The walls of his inner castle had been breeched and he no longer felt as prepared to fight the monsters as he once had.

"Do you know how I met Margren?" Juldrid asked after a long silence.

Isranon shook his head.

"My ancestor is Carliff the Mad Lich who rules Norendel. The sa'necari calls him mad because his people defend, rather than feed upon, the living. He and his were punished with undeath because they broke oath with a branch clan of the Rowans. For five hundred years they have waited for release, waiting for the forgiveness of a paladin or priest of the Rowan lineage to release them."

"So you came here looking for Rowans and found Margren?"

Juldrid bowed her head, but not before Isranon saw she had tears coursing her cheeks. "Yes."

Although their grief was for different things, it was still grief and when Isranon extended his arms to her, Juldrid entered them. They held each other and mourned together.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN. THE LAST MILES



Morning brought a day of unexpected warmth, almost like a last gasp of summer trying to retake the ground it had lost to autumn over the past weeks. The Valdren gathered to see them off led by Tehmistoclus and Queen Magdarien Havenrain: now that the time of the promise was formally ended, a bright chatter of cheery gossip and merry speculation filled every Valdren conversation, especially the tale of how the prince had set the interfering Tehmistoclus on his ear concerning her love-life.

As the units formed up to march, Valdren rangers acting as scouts fanned out ahead of them under the command of Borian Silverwing, Brendorn's cousin. Borian himself had received his orders to scout only a few hours earlier: he had known for several days that his company would ride guard on their young princess, but not that their duties included scouting until Tehmistoclus and Laurelyanne descended upon him in the wee hours of that morning. They had assured him that Aejys would be informed of this. However, owing to various distractions and interruptions, Aejys received the information only moments ahead of the deployment of Borian's forces.

Aejys knew Borian as a level-headed individual who would not unduly get in Hanadi's way, while Hanadi was smugly unflappable. With any luck, the two would go about their business without friction. Nonetheless, Aejys was already riding toward the front to speak with Hanadi herself, when a shriek of insults in Euzadi sent her into a gallop.

She found Hanadi in an aggressive stance, feet spread, left hand on her hip, glaring at Borian and shaking a finger in his face in an uncharacteristic fit of rage and indignation. Aejys knew it must have taken a lot to banish Hanadi's usual smug coolness, and she considered this as she viewed the tableau. Borian, his auburn hair with the two wing-like streaks of bright silver at the temples, stood, arms-crossed and head tilted, regarding Hanadi from the corners of his eyes alone.

"I do not care what company your scouts rode with," Borian said quietly, evenly. "My rangers were scouting dangerous ground while the oldest of your people were still in swaddling cloths."

Hanadi paused to draw breath before launching into another round. "I am Aeijstrys Rowan's captain of scouts..."

"And you were being cut to ribbons when my rangers rescued your company."

"Hmnp! Brundarad is worth a hundred of your rangers!"

Borian gave a grudging nod. "The shadow hound is impressive. But our princess rides in your company and our duty is to protect her regardless of what you or Aejys might wish."

"I have kept her safe."

"Then you should have kept her out of Aeijstrys' bed."

That proved too much for the haughty nomad, three silver-runed throwing stars materialized in her hand like a fistful of razors. Aejs threw herself from Gwyndar's back just as Hanadi lashed out with her left fist. The ha'taren stepped between them, taking the blow herself, hard enough in the chest to stagger her. Aejs blinked, recovering her balance without losing her composure. Borian looked just plain shocked. "Hanadi, gather your people into the line," Aejs ordered coolly.

"Brundarad..."

"Brundarad can scout," Borian allowed calmly. "But my rangers are far better than your myn."

Aejs looked from one to the other. The heat had gone from Hanadi's expression, schooled back into hauteur. "He's right, Hanadi. Few humans can match them."

Hanadi gave a curt bow and turned on her heel, signaling her scouts to follow her deeper into the line.

Aejs watched her go, and then turned to Borian, her expression serious, the tips of her mouth twisted into a sharp trace of distress. "What is this about keeping Tamlestari out of my bed?"

Borian winced. "I should not have said it..."

"But you did."

He glanced about them, taking in the small sidewise looks from soldiers and rangers studiously pretending not to be listening. "This is not something that should be aired in public."

"You've already done that. So spit the rest out." Aejs' voice was stern, leaving no openings for the sylvan to step into.

Borian gave a troubled nod. "You are a marked mon, Aejs. All you love are marked by the mere fact that you love them. Our princess carries your child. It is common knowledge. If she continues to sleep in your tent, stand by your side, sooner or later Margren will kill her also, and the line of Eldarion Havenrain will end."

Aejs could not argue with his words: Brendorn and Cassana were dead, Ladonys gravely wounded, Laeoli wounded and in hiding. Stones seemed to gather and press in her stomach, her chest tightened and a tiny fringe of dizziness formed at the edges of her thoughts. Borian had just spoken her own innermost fears, ones she tried hard not to speak or think, to keep shoved down hard in that shrinking lockbox in her heart. Her voice caught in her throat as she forced her words out, "Go, take your place in line."

Borian bowed deeply, caught the reins of his horse and mounted, turning back to take his place.

"Wait," Aeajys called. He stopped and the ha'taren stepped close, lowering her voice so that only he could hear. "Make peace with Hanadi... You don't want her for an enemy and I do not need any conflict brewing in our midst, is that understood?"

"It is."

Tagalong stepped from under a nearby tree where she had been watching the whole scene. "Ya all right?" Tagalong asked, watching Borian disappear down the line.

"Yes," Aeajys replied, remounting.

Tagalong shook her head at Aeajys' departing back, muttering "Uh uh hmnn! I don't think so."

\* \* \* \*

Oil-fed torches in tall spear-like sconces surrounded each of the ten tiers of the altar of hecatomb in the innermost section of Dragonshead, their dancing flames casting weird shifting patterns of light and shadow along the walls and across the faces of the unholy assemblage gathered there. On the topmost tier, Mephistis stood beside Margren, his black and crimson cloak thrown back, one arm draped affectionately around his Sharani wife. He pointed with his staff at two small knobs at the north edge. "See that, my dearest," he said, his rich voice commanding and sensual as his hand stole up her back to stroke her neck. "The Ancient Most had an interesting technology." He pressed one with the butt of his staff. A grinding of gears filled the altar. With a loud groan, the stone bleeding-tables receded slowly into the floors until only the blood grooves and the chains on the four corners remained above.

Margren's eyes grew large, "Interesting. But to what purpose?"

Mephistis grinned ferally. "This one," he pressed the second knob. The shrine groaned louder still as T-shaped scaffolding rose at the head of each recessed bleeding table. "We will take blood and raise power – I thought you would like to give Aeajys something more to think about."

He waved expansively at his three sa'necari initiates standing a tier lower than they and the sixteen acolytes on the next tier down, finally indicating the host of servants and soldiers with a scattering of novices filling the lowest tier and wide floor between the altar and the walls. At his nod, an acolyte descended the tiers and opened a door. Soldiers dragged twenty young to middle aged females in, binding them to the scaffolding and stripping away their clothing.

"I harvested a small village to the north," Mephistis explained. "Our soldiers took a large number of children for the final rite at solstice, including two virgin males."

A shiver of delight ran through Margren. "Oh yesssss!"

She drew a blade from a fold in her ornate silk robe, hilt and blade black, etched in crimson runes. She opened her robes, exposing her firm young body. Margren rubbed herself over the nude villager, feeling the dark-kyndi rise. She stroked the woman with the blade, tasting her terror for a moment before slipping it into her victim's stomach and giving it a hard twist. The villager screamed. Margren bent, pressing her face into the wound, lapping at the blood. Around her other myn were screaming in torment and agony, sending Margren's pulse racing, sharpening the mystic phallus that materialized and grew hard between her thighs. Margren mounted the villager, shoving the dark-kyndi deep inside her. The villager's screams turned into low moans blended of anguish and ecstasy. Her body jerked each time Margren slipped the knife in, but she never again cried aloud.

Intense pleasure burned in Margren's face, her red robe covered both of them, concealing everything except the rhythmic thrusting of her body, driving the dark-kyndi deeper and deeper. With each thrust Margren slipped the knife in again until the villager's body became a mass of wounds growing less and less human in appearance. Margren felt the woman's heart faltering, struggling, and knew that her victim was now only moments from death. The dark-kyndi had become a roar within Margren, the power built until she felt ready to explode. Margren reared up, sinking her fangs into the villager's throat, sucking deeply, wanting to feel her death at both levels: blood and dark-kyndi. Margren brought the knife up and shoved it into the woman's heart, stealing her last moment of life. Power erupted through Margren, every cell in her body felt seared. Her head reared back, releasing her hold on the villager's throat. With a cry of pleasure, Margren sank to her knees, dropping her bloody knife.

Before she could rise, Mephistis seized her, pushing her down onto the recessed bleeding table on her back. He entered her, their blood-covered bodies moving together. Her teeth delicately broke the skin of his neck, finding the favored artery, and she drank just a little, remembering even in the throes of her passion that she did not want to endanger him or the others who would follow him. The acolytes gathered around them, chanting. The dark-kyndi rose, engulfing the powerful sa'necari in an auric web, draining him magically, sexually, and physically. The chamber hummed loudly with sheer energy, the air filling with dancing black sparks. The servants fled the chamber first. Mephistis pushed himself off Margren, staggering drunkenly to his feet. Three novices caught him before he could fall, carrying him to a room where he could rest and be well tended.

Bodramet came next, murmuring into her ear where only she could hear it. "The half-a-mon should have been tabled on his belly with these others."

"Yesss," Margren moaned as Bodramet moved inside her, and her fangs broke the skin of his neck.

"You shall have his death."

An image swept through Margren and for an instant she saw Isranon: he stood upon the highest tier of an edifice similar to the Altar of Hecatomb with a staff of incredible power, calling down the winds, the lances of sunfire, and lightning to destroy the altars of darkness. Then it was gone as Bodramet's power rushed into her.

One after another the three initiates followed Mephistis, taking their turn with Margren. She drank from each of them as they pierced her, and the dark-kyndi sheathed them. By the time that the third was led staggering away by servants, the dancing sparks had become like a heavy mist that could barely be seen through. The power pressed upon everyone in the chamber. The soldiers withdrew swiftly as if shoved down by the tremendous energy. Only the acolytes and novices remained. The acolytes followed the initiates, entering her and being drained by the dark-kyndi. Margren's eyes gleamed red within an orb of black as the last one mounted her. She wrapped her legs and arms around him, her teeth going deep and savage into the artery. Too late he realized what she intended, trying desperately to pull away as the dark-kyndi imprisoned him. The novices fled when they realized that Margren was killing him. She took the death-gift from him and with him the power gained from more than two dozen mortgiefan he himself had taken in the course of his training. Margren lay alone on the altar in the empty chamber, the body of the dead acolyte draping her, twenty drained corpses hanging from the scaffolding. The power screamed about the room, seeking release, growing beyond restraining and Margren spoke a single word: "Aejys!"

\* \* \* \*

A gale force wind came raging out of nowhere: unforeseen and unexpected, it slammed through the narrow forested pass, breaking trees, ripping loose boulders which had sat secure for millennia upon the mountain's side, sending them hurtling down on the company. Horses and riders screamed, trying to scatter from the path of the careening juggernauts. The pass was too narrow and for several there was simply no place to run. Eliahu cast off the last vestiges of his pretense; raising CallThunder high in both hands, he shouted out words of power, demanding an answer from the skies. Lightning flashed and struck, shattering many of the huge stones. But not even the High Mage of Winter could get them all. Myn died around him, the life crushed from them while those more fortunate lifted their shields as shelter from the flying fragments of those boulders Eliahu stopped.

"It's a sending," Grawl snarled, rising on his hind legs. He sheathed his claws, extending his paws as they slowly changed into long fingered heavily furred hands. He pulled his staff from his back where it rested strapped beside his pack. Clemmerick, standing next to Grawl and Josh, squatted down beside a tree, wrapped his arms around the trunk and heaved as he straightened, bringing the tree with him.

Grawl, seeing what he was up to stripped most of the branches away with a swipe of his paws.

"Take shelter!" the ogre bellowed, charging into the rolling stones and batting them away from the company.

"Everyone! Up against the cliffs. Get as flat as you can!" As her company hurried to obey, many dismounting and shoving their horses up against the stone, Aejys turned desperately to Laurelyanne, "Where? You know the area – where?"

"Hundred yards further, a cave."

"Tag, pass the word, everyone dismount, get close to the cliffside, stay under the overhang as much as possible."

Aejys slipped from the saddle, landing lightly despite the wind. "Go find it," she ordered Gwyndar. The big wynderjyn snorted and moved out into the wind, his head down as he struggled for each step.

Debris flew around them, filling the air with missiles of earth, stone and tree parts, but pressed closely to the steeper side of the cliffs, they made smaller targets and fewer got hit. Terrified animals screamed and pulled, even the rangers were controlling their mounts with increasing difficulty. Only the wynderjyns remained steady beneath the clearly unnatural assault.

"I see it," Aejys shouted. For just a single heartbeat the lapsed ha'taren felt hope rise, then a wild howling began in the air above them. Aejys looked up and saw skeletally thin figures on gaunt, parchment-skinned mounts riding the air currents. A dirty yellow aura surrounded them. Her stomach tightened: she had not seen them since the day that Kalestari Desharen, Tamlestari's ma'aram, slew Aurean of Waejontor.

"Vargeis!" She shouted, pointing, her voice carrying like a warcry.

No banewitch, necromancer, or sa'necari other than Aurean, greatest banewitch of Waejontor now ten years dead by the hand of Kalestari Desharen, had had the power to summon them until now, much less give them that stale urine aura which meant that they had substance and were not merely wraiths of terror magic. "Form up! Tag, get the mages in the cave, pull the reds and then my blacks in around them."

The stout dwarf nodded, reined back, shouting orders.

Aejys turned to Tamlestari standing at her shoulder, "Go with the mages."

"No." Tamlestari growled.

"Damn it! Get in the fucking cave!" Aejys shouted angrily, giving the young woman

a shove.

Tamlestari bristled, looking for just a moment as if she would like to hit Aejys.

Laurelyanne put her hand to Tamlestari's stomach. "The children..."

Tamlestari's expression softened as quickly as it had hardened. She nodded and retreated.

"Hanadi," Aejys turned to the Guildsmon. "How are your greens armed?"

"Kenda'ryl and silver, runed" Hanadi answered calmly, through lips curled back in a savage expression. "All runed. Jon Dawn's legionnaires, all of them."

"Laurelyanne?"

The Valdren mage nodded, "runed."

"Greens and rangers on the outer perimeter," Aejys ordered quickly.

"Have the reds and blacks leave their weapons sheathed," Laurelyanne said. "Use whatever sticks they can pick up, I'm blessing the earth." The mage lifted her staff, waving it in a broad circling sweep as a surge of green light roared forth in an expanding blanket.

Clemmerick, standing near the middle of the line as it began to reform, dropped the tree he'd just uprooted and scooped up Josh and Eliahu, carrying them swiftly to the cave. He deposited them roughly within it, striding back through the ranks forming around Aejys. He retrieved his tree without missing stride

\* \* \* \*

Eliahu immediately dropped into a cross-legged position, pressing his forehead to CallThunder, his awareness reaching into the winds to fight Margren for control of them. He felt for the winds limits, felt their force buck and scream with rage at the touch of his questing power. Death it shrieked; blood and pain; and then it wept, but the tears were clots of flesh. It tore at him with icy talons, ripping into his mind. He had to force his shields into place as they strove to prevent his raising them. Eliahu reeled, feeling an agonizing pressure building behind his eyes. Never before had he ever felt such tremendous power and never before had he ever wanted to call a force of nature evil – but this was filled with such hatred and rage that he recoiled. The moment that he broke contact with the winds, the pressure abated and he realized that tears were running down his face from the effort and pain. This was a truly unequal contest, even for the High Mage of Winter. He could not do this alone.

"Josh! Help me," he cried out in sheer desperation, reaching for the sot. Josh blinked in confusion for a moment before taking Eliahu's extended hand and settling

beside him.

"I'm frightened," Josh muttered, reaching for his flask and taking a deep pull.

"So am I, my friend," Eliahu confessed. "So am I. But we must try." The last time he had tasted Josh's unbridled power it had burned him on the road to St. Tarmus. He was almost as frightened just then of linking with Josh as he was of Margren's assault, but he'd watched in his scrying pool during the Great War as small units of vargeis ripped through whole units of veteran ha'taren, rangers and paladins of many faiths. If he could steal the winds he could hurl the creatures away.

"Take another drink, Josh, if it will steady you, then try to follow me, if I need something you'll hear me in here," Eliahu said as he settled CallThunder in the crook of his arm, placing his palm on Josh's forehead. He could feel the untutored, undisciplined drunken sailor-mage trembling. "Whatever I ask for just give it to me. Stay calm. Ground and center. You remember how to do that, don't you?"

Josh nodded, took another drink, and then slid his flask back into his pocket. His features smoothed out, his eyes taking on that strange, knowing expression as if someone or something else looked out of his eyes. "Ready. Let's get them, matey."

Eliahu nodded, closing his eyes and reaching out again for the winds feeling Margren's savage hatred in their movements, feeling Josh's tremendous power roaring at the edges of awareness like some incredible, unbroken stallion challenging the elements themselves and himself caught between them. "Let's go."

\* \* \* \*

Grawl lumbered through the lines to stand with the rangers who gave him space. He reared up on his hind legs as his forepaws reshaped into hands and he pulled his staff from his back.

Borian Silverwing looked up at Grawl's huge form. "Should you not be with the mages?"

"Naw," Grawl gave a barking laugh. "A shaman fights at the front."

\* \* \* \*

Clemmerick shouldered his tree, marching to the front of the units to meet their attackers first, and noticed Jeord carrying a somewhat smaller tree of his own. The hostler cocked his head just a fraction, letting Jeord know his action had been noticed. Jeord gave a lopsided grin, shouting over the wind, "Making Tag proud of me!"

"Then at them, brother," Clemmerick replied.



Every piece of wood, every tree and bush was limned in a dark green aura, including their huge clubs. "This will do some damage," Clemmerick muttered.

Then the vargeis descended on them and the battle was met.

\* \* \* \*

The vargeis came in a wedge as Aeijys moved to the front to face them. Clemmerick and Jeord charged into them with their clubs, crushing several of the creatures in their initial rush. A large number swarmed over them, attacking with their strange rust-colored blades, their gaunt steeds rising and striking with their hooves. Aeijys' stomach did a sick roll as she saw them both go down. Gwyndar bumped her with his head and she mounted quickly. She drew sword, wanting with every fiber of her being to go to their aid, but fully aware of how suicidal that would be.

"Tag, get the rear moving. Orderly retreat into the cave."

"Yeah," Tagalong said, turning and shouting as she strode to the rear.

Clemmerick erupted suddenly from the knot of vargeis that had swept over him, knocking them aside. Blood ran down his great arms and face, his jerkin was torn and soaked with red. He carried Jeord under one arm like a sack of potatoes. With a huge sweep of his arms, he cleared a path back to the retreating ranks, which opened to admit him. A ragged cheer went up when he reached them, giving Jeord to a handful of blacks and reds that emerged from the cave to take him. Then Aeijys began to slowly back up, withdrawing, line by line.

Gwyndar reared, his hooves beating at the foes' mounts. Aeijys struck right and left, forcing the vargeis back. Her rune-sword glowed with cold white fury. The vargeis killed the Guildsmyn fighting on either side of Aeijys and closed in on her. The vargeis swirled around her six deep, all trying to reach her with a single-minded intensity. They had been sent to slay just one person, the others were incidental, simple obstacles to their goal. More and more of Aeijys' forces escaped into the cave as she had ordered them. Then suddenly her lines collapsed and the vargeis swept around her. Gwyndar whirled, striking and kicking and biting.

Borian rallied his rangers and went back after Aeijys. His myn fell like sheaves of grain before the scythe: he could not cut through to her aid. Gwyndar's raging cries turned abruptly to pain as Aeijys felt their intuitive link snap and she crashed to earth with the big animal. Gwyndar's body trapped her leg on the shield side. She parried frantically as the vargeis swarmed around her. A sword drove through her mail, deep into the juncture of chest and shoulder. Her blade fell from her nerveless hand. Agony ripped through her leg and side as their swords found her. Darkness swept over her and consciousness fled.

A huge arm swept the creatures away from Aeijys, lifting her up and away. Clemmerick staggered back into the cave with her. Brush burned just inside the cave

mouth, reinforced with Laurelyanne's magic so that the winds could not blow it out. The vargeis could not pass the enchanted flames. Clemmerick lowered Aejs into waiting arms, then turned, walked three steps, and sank to his knees, clutching at himself as he folded up to lie in a still heap on the ground.

\* \* \* \*

Eliahu's awareness touched the magical force controlling the winds, felt its terrifying rage and hatred woven through with the psychic stench of near madness. The power behind it had risen from some obscene arcane ritual unlike anything he had yet encountered in his near century of life; he could smell the deaths that had been taken to raise it. Is this what the mages who went up against Aurean encountered? Even in circle with all of his mages in the citadel of Winter, he doubted he could fight it. Then his awareness was ripped back, sent hurling into the cave and his body as Josh broke contact with him.

He swayed, blinking, trying to clear the psychic debris from his mind. Josh was screaming hysterically. Eliahu turned without rising and saw first Clemmerick's blood soaked body with healers scrambling about him, then Aejs with Laurelyanne bending over her still form. "Dear gods, no!"

Josh stood above the High Mage of Winter, screaming on and on. Power danced along his arms like blue flames, and then swept around him as if on a private wind, swirling upward, filling the chamber. Eliahu scrambled to his feet, impulsively grabbing Josh's shoulder. Josh's power flowed over Eliahu, flowed into him, with a cold burning intensity that set his nerve endings burning and shrieking. Eliahu's awareness tore from his body as Josh dragged him into the astral, plunging through the roof of the cave. His body collapsed at Josh's feet. He saw Grawl curl up around him vainly trying to shield him. Then he was out of the cave, captive to Josh's power, riding it like some incredible beast.

"Josh! Please, Josh, hear me," Eliahu cried, but Josh did not answer. Blue lightning danced above the winds, gathering itself in nightmare strength. The power swirled again as Josh sent it down against the vargeis. The lightning darted in crowding strikes among the vargeis, shattering them, felling trees, and breaking stones, leaving deep scoring in the earth itself. For single fleeting instant Eliahu glimpsed Josh's spirit form as it bestrode the valley like a giant, one foot planted firmly on the mountains to each side.

Josh gathered up the force of the winds and hurled them back, forcing them eastward. Eliahu cried out again and again, trying to pull Josh away from his pursuit. The landscape flashed swiftly by as they hurled toward Shaurone. Eliahu saw the ruins atop Dragonshead just before he blacked out.

\* \* \* \*

Power exploded over Dragonshead. A long line of ruins collapsed on the bluffs.

The earth shook. Chunks of ceiling rained about Margren. She threw the acolyte's body off herself, scrambling to her feet, trying to run. Then the force of the strike curled around her, hurling her into a wall. Margren twisted into a fetal position, sobbing with terror. She lay there for a day and a half before anyone could dig through the debris and reach her.

\* \* \* \*

The heavens opened up with loud peels of thunder and lightning dancing overhead in the narrowing mountain pass. Rain descended in sheets, obscuring the landscape. Laurelyanne stood at the cave mouth, staring out at the debris and fallen trees blocking the entrance. It would take days to dig through it. Until then they would be trapped there.

At Borian's request, Laurelyanne used mind-speech to send the Valdren scouts, who had been far ahead of the company, to the nearest town for help. In quick order only Brundarad remained at large in the storm.

"All this to slay one woman..." she muttered darkly before turning back to see to the wounded. "The war, Borian," she told the captain of rangers, her sister's son, "never ended, we merely had a seven year respite."

\* \* \* \*

Aejys opened her eyes at the touch of a cool cloth on her face, cleaning away the blood. It took her vision a moment to focus, and then her gaze met Tamlestari's cool green orbs. A sick terror gripped her as all the faces of the dead flooded through her mind and she screamed, "Get away from me! Get the hell away from me!"

Tamlestari drew back, dropping the cloth. "Aejys, beloved, it's me. Tamlestari."

"I know who you are! Someone get this bitch away from me." Aejys thrashed, shoving Tamlestari aside, trying to sit up. A wave of pain and dizziness dropped her and she cursed loudly.

Tamlestari's face clouded with hurt and she sprang to her feet, fleeing across the cave.

"Shhh." A healer, someone Aejys did not know, bent over her. "Rest, Lord Aejys. Calm or I'll sedate you." The healer shook back her sleeve to reveal a band of tiny color-coded darts.

Aejys acquiesced. She lay back just as a tear of deepest sorrow squeezed between her eyelashes. She had to drive Tamlestari off, break her heart – it was the only way to keep her and their children safe. It was far better if she never saw the youth again, never met their children – at least then they would have a chance at life. The only chance they would have with her would be death. Gwyndar was dead. Aejys felt

certain then that she could not deal with any more deaths among those she loved – any more and it would be so easy to just go mad. "Aroana God," she whispered, "I'm not strong enough to save realms anymore. Find someone else... Just let me get Laeoli and Ladonys out of Shaurone safely."

"Aejys?" Tagalong squatted by her head.

"What?" Aejys looked up into the dwarf's broad, blunt face twisted by grief. "Who?"

"Jeord ... my friend. He's dead. The. Big. Idiot." Tagalong tried to keep her voice even, but Aejys could hear the cracks and strain that those who knew her less well would miss. "Tried to make like Clemmerick."

"I'm sorry." Aejys reached up and stroked Tagalong's tangled red locks.

"Healer says ya'll live. That's something."

"Clemmerick?"

Tagalong dragged a heavy sigh, "Got cut up pretty good, but he'll be fine. Ogres got great constitutions."

"That's enough," the healer said, pouring a golden liquid into a small glass. He raised Aejys up, supporting her head and shoulders as he placed the glass at her lips. Aejys drank and lay back, passing easily into sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Josh huddled in a rocky niche at the farthest place in the cave from the others. He laid his head on his knees, his arms encircling his legs, his eyes staring in an unfocussed way off into space. Eliahu knelt beside him, stroking his head and shoulders.

"It's all right, Josh," he murmured reassuringly, as if to a small troubled child. He had been trying for an hour to get through to Josh, but the man seemed almost catatonic. "Everything is all right now. Aejys will live and so will Clemmerick."

Josh never moved, did not even seem to hear.

Laurelyanne squatted down next to Eliahu, studying Josh. She reached in her satchel and began to mix several potions in a glass, gold and red and green, yet the contents turned purple. "See if you can get him to drink this."

"You put holadil in it?"

"Yes."

"That's what started all this mess!" Eliahu snapped.

"No, it isn't." Josh's voice sounded far off and distant as if he was not really there. "My father started it."

Laurelyanne and Eliahu glanced at each other in startlement, then back at Josh. She pressed the glass into his hands. Josh leaned into the cave wall, refusing to look at them as he continued, but he accepted the glass and sipped at it.

"I was born with the magic. I did little things – lit candles, talked to animals, called birds out of trees." He paused, took a larger sip, and went on. "Father was a sailor, first mate on a fine ship. He was superstitious. My magic frightened him. He found a back alley, apostate priest mage. Paid him to burn the magic out of me." Tears started down Josh's seamed, weather-beaten face. "My body never quit burning, hungering for the magic. Felt like all the nerves in my skin burned ... except when I drank." The tears ran more and more freely until it was almost like a river running from his eyes. "Holadil just brought it back ... but the pain didn't go away. When I'm sober I still hurt and burn..."

Josh closed his eyes, leaning against the cave wall. One of the growing side effects of the rite, which had burned out the magic, combined with heavy drinking, was that he appeared more than twice his actual age and he had stopped telling people how old he was because no one would believe him. Josh was only a few months shy of twenty-five.

"The sins of the parents are always visited upon the children," Laurelyanne said softly, sadly. "When we get to the next village I'll try to mix up something to help you."

Josh looked up at her then with a look of simple hope and longing, as innocent as a child. He tried to smile. "Help me?"

"I promise, Josh." Laurelyanne squeezed his shoulder. "Now you rest too." She stood up to leave.

"Laurelyanne," Eliahu said, "thank you. Would you ask Grawl to come here?"

"Certainly."

Josh reached out to Eliahu. "And then ... then there's the dreams. Do you think she can help me with the dreams?"

"What dreams?"

"Dreams full of blood, death, and fire. Dreams where Abelard comes to talk with me. He says I'm supposed to do something. But I run away from him. I'm more

afraid of Abelard than I am the rest of it."

Eliahu shivered. "Oh gods, Josh. Why didn't you tell one of us sooner about these dreams?"

"I'm afraid of them..."

"Do you know what your birth parents' last name was? Might it have been Abelard?"

"I don't know their name. I don't remember them. Is Abelard a last name?" Josh's voice strengthened a little as he sipped Laurelyanne's brew.

"Yes. The mage master's name was Josiah Abelard. He was Sharani. He died five hundred years ago. What does he look like in your dreams?"

"I never see his face clearly. But there is a flame mark burned into his forehead and when he raises his sword, the mark becomes a crown of flames."

"Kalirion's mark. He was the last mage-paladin to the Sun-Lord. If his spirit is speaking to you in your dreams, Josh, you should listen to him. He won't hurt you."

"I'll try. I promise I'll try. But he terrifies me."

\* \* \* \*

It took six days for the villagers, working hand in hand with the able-bodied in Aejs' company to clear the trees and brush away from the cave entrance. Laurelyanne wanted to stay longer, let Aejs and Clemmerick rest, but Aejs would have none of it. The Valdren mage procured a covered wagon for Aejs to ride in back. Eliahu drove with Josh sitting beside him. In bits and pieces Josh began to talk to Eliahu and Laurelyanne, confiding to them things he had never told anyone. Not even Clemmerick. Especially about the magic, what it felt to have it ripped from him and then the terror of having it back. His foster parents had made him feel that there was something unnatural and evil about his having the magic that was particular to himself. He told them about the dreams and visions and, while they could not interpret them, they could understand how it would disturb him so deeply. The more he managed to get out, the more he was able to speak of, and Josh grew steadier.

\* \* \* \*

The first night out, they sheltered beside a running stream at the foot of the mountains. The trees were ablaze with the colors of autumn and the weather had taken another warm turn. Although Aejs had driven Tamlestari repeatedly from her side, the stubborn young mon settled Emrindi beside Aejs' tent, and started to move her gear inside when Laurelyanne extended her staff across the tent's entrance.

"I have a tent waiting for you among our rangers," she told the youth, her voice as gentle as could be managed, fully cognizant of her response to Tehmistoclus' meddling earlier.

"Like hell you have!" Tamlestari flared.

Tagalong trundled up and stood looking from one to the other, thoughtful and just a tad speculative.

"It's for your safety," Laurelyanne continued in her gentle tone.

"Are you suggesting that my lover is a danger? Or simply not good enough?"

"Aejys is a good mon," Laurelyanne replied evenly, moving more firmly between Tamlestari and the tent. "Aejys is not the problem."

"Then what is?" The color had risen in Tamlestari's cheeks and her eyes burned like bright coals. "She was just fine before your people started meddling!"

"Your people," Laurelyanne said pointedly. "Like it or not, you are our princess."

"Uhhhh," Tagalong groaned, catching at Laurelyanne's sleeve. "Wrong translation—"

"Don't condescend to me!" Tamlestari fairly shrieked.

"Uh ... uh..." Tagalong pulled Laurelyanne's sleeve hard.

The mage glanced down, bending closer while keeping an eye on her irate scion.

"Puttin' the gender on things, makes it a diminutive," Tagalong muttered in Laurelyanne's ear as the volatile youth launched into a string of epithets and expletives in Sharani that brought a burning blush to the dwarf's face. "Let's find Aejys..."

Tagalong dragged Laurelyanne swiftly in the opposite direction. Tamlestari, watching their retreat, smiled smugly, cooling quickly as she returned to moving her stuff into the tent.

\* \* \* \*

Aejys eased out of the back of the wagon as Eliahu tethered the horses beside the tent. Josh came around and offered her his arm. She glanced at him and started to refuse, then reconsidered. Josh helped her the rest of the way down. "You should sleep in the wagon," he said.

Aejys shook her head. "No, I need to have more air."

As she entered the tent she came face to face with Tamlestari. Tamlestari's eyes filled with tears. "Don't send me away again. I need to be with you. Please."

Aejys froze, her stomach knotting. Tamlestari's tears nearly brought tears to Aejys' own eyes. "Get out of here," she hissed. "I don't want to see you. I don't want to talk to you. I don't even want to know you're here." Then she grabbed Tamlestari's bedroll, throwing it out of the tent.

Tamlestari gave a strangled cry and fled.

Aejys collapsed onto the cot, the movement had hurt her, but rejecting Tamlestari yet again hurt her worse. She folded her arms across her knees, pressing her face into them and wept long muffled sobs. "I love you."

"Ya sure ya want ta keep doin' this ta her?" Tagalong poked her face into the tent.

"Yes."

Tagalong shook her head and started off in Tamlestari's wake, only to have Aejys call her back.

Aejys turned a tear-streaked face to the stout dwarf, her childhood companion. "Tag, promise me. If ... things go wrong... Don't leave me in Shaurone... Put me next to Brendorn... I've been happy there..."

"Nothin's gonna happen ta ya!" Tag exploded, "Get that through yer head, ya blasted puddin' head paladin!"

Aejys smiled sadly. "Tag, if Margren comes any closer to killing me than she has so far, I'll be very dead. Just promise me..."

Tagalong sighed heavily, her expression twisted by the shadow of trouble and doubt: the more things Margren threw at them, the less confident Tagalong felt in her ability to protect Aejys. "Yeah. I promise. Next to Brendorn."

"Good. This needs to be understood. I want you to take care of Tamlestari and our children. And if I die unclean..."

"Yar not gonna die!"

"Tag, humor me. If I die unclean, you'll take my head and heart."

"I promise, Aejys."

"Thanks."

Tagalong shook her head and raced off, as much to get away from Aejys saying



things the dwarf did not want to hear as to catch up with Tamlestari.

\* \* \* \*

Nothing further attacked them on their journey. It was as if the magical attack by Josh had taken the fight out of Margren. They reached the Fords of Idar on the southwestern border just a little over two weeks later. The Mar'ajan Geoa Odaren met them there with two units of border guards. They sat tall in their saddles, some of the finest light cavalry on the continent. Geoa dismounted, as did Aejs. They met in the middle. Geoa's thoughtful gray eyes looked heavy with inner conflicts, almost sad. Fifteen years older than Aejs, but still too young by Sharani standards of aging for the white streaking her black hair. She clasped Aejs' arm, pulling her into an embrace that she held for several minutes. Then Geoa gave her a pat on the back, pulling away.

"Come on," Geoa said. "We have to talk..." She led Aejs out of earshot of the troops, settling cross-legged on the ground. "This is hard..." she sighed heavily. "Go on, sit down." She gestured next to her.

Aejs' stomach knotted with fear. "Ladonys?"

"And Laeoli."

"No," Aejs protested, "I've had letters ... she was safe..." She felt her body go numb, the bottom of her stomach seemed to dissolve into yawning emptiness. "I—"

"Those letters ... whoever sent them ... lied," Geoa said sternly. "Laeoli was slain by the shifter and bears that attacked Ladonys. They found her body the night of the equinox, washed up on the shore of the Arris River. The same night Ladonys died."

Aejs began to shake hard. She clutched her hands, pressing them into her stomach, feeling a scream rising in the center of her being, forcing its way up like a rock-hard fist through her throat, into her mouth. It broke across the gathered companies, shattering their thoughts, ending their conversations, tumbling their world into uncertainty.

Tamlestari kicked Emrindi into a gallop, breaking from the company before anyone could stop her. She flung herself from the saddle at Aejs' feet, gathering the screaming, weeping woman in her arms.

Aejs shoved Tamlestari away, growling, "Get away, you stupid shit!"

Tamlestari stared at Aejs, and then threw her wombmother a questioning glance. Geoa shook her head, and then nodded that she should leave. Tamlestari turned to Aejs again. "I love you, Aejs... Please, let me..."

"I hate you. Do you hear me? I HATE YOU!" Aejs screamed, lifting her fist as if

to strike the youth.

Tamlestari recoiled, moving away, weeping now herself.

Geoa took her arm, leading her back to the assembled units. "Let her be. Laeoli and Ladonys were both slain."

"Ma'aram," Tamlestari said, letting herself be led, "mei Amita is dead also."

Geoa released Tamlestari, pressing her hands to her face. "I've known. In my heart. I've known." She started on and Tamlestari followed, catching at her, making her pause.

"What more?" Geoa asked calmly, but the strain was showing.

Tamlestari bent close to her ear, whispering, "I'm carrying Aejs and Brendorn's child."

"You're... WHAT?" Geoa stood thunderstruck. "Does anyone know this child is Aejs?" She reached out to touch her daughter's conspicuously swollen stomach.

Tamlestari smiled sadly, shaking her head. She did not bother trying to explain that all of Vallimrah knew, but that their policy of "don't tell the humans" made it a publicly kept state secret. Nor would she tell her 'lasah that her ma'aram was, after a fashion alive, since Geoa had long ago remarried. That would be cruel and needless. The Sharani were as little inclined to gossip as the Valdren.

"Keep it that way," Geoa said with more sternness than she meant. "I need to think this through."

Tagalong and Laurelyanne passed them on foot.

\* \* \* \*

Geoa sent most of Aejs' units under Hanadi's leadership and all of her own on to Iarwind, her capital. She took Tamlestari with her, trying to just take a little joy at the prospect of her first grandchildren.

Tagalong, Laurelyanne, and ten Valdren rangers, set up camp close to where Aejs sat weeping and cursing into the night.

Tagalong sat beside Aejs, patting now and again.

"If I'd taken them with me..."

"Huh uh. Kaethreyn woulda had every soldier in the entire kingdom chasing us."

"Margren dies, Tag," Aejs' voice had a dead, broken quality to it, yet now and again, Tagalong heard something else, something disturbing, a thin thread of stone-cold resolve and a freezing fatalistic anger.

Tagalong's eyes filled with tears and she started patting Aejs again. Laurelyanne squatted in front of them with a tall bottle of liquor and three small glasses. She poured the liquor, setting the first small glass in front of Aejs, folding the ha'taren's hands around it.

"What did you put in it?" Aejs asked suspiciously.

"Just whiskey," Laurelyanne replied, lifting her glass, "we're all drinking it." She downed her glass like a veteran and refilled it.

Tagalong kept looking from one to the other, then slammed her drink down her throat and grabbed the bottle, pouring another.

Aejs watched Laurelyanne down her second glass and frowned at her. Finally, convinced that the drink held only whiskey, she swallowed it. It had scarcely gone down her throat when she swayed and tumbled forward, collapsing against the mage who settled her gently to earth.

Tagalong stared, glancing from her glass to Aejs. "Father of Stone!" she yelped. "I thought ya said ya didn't spike it! What am I drinkin'?"

"Whiskey, Tag, just whiskey," Laurelyanne answered tiredly. "I spelled her glass." She stood up, lit her staff with a word, and waved it at their camp. Borian Silverwing and another ranger came, lifted Aejs up, and bore the unconscious mon away.

Tagalong grabbed the bottle, thinking seriously about killing it.

"I just couldn't bear it," Laurelyanne said as they walked, "Listening to such grief... I lost a grandchild and my youngest son... If Aejs doesn't kill her, I think I will."

"Yer gonna hafta beat me ta her."

They broke camp quickly heading for Iarwind. Borian rode with the unconscious Aejs on his lap, cradled like a child, his face grim as he thought about his murdered cousins.

\* \* \* \*

"Hello."

Hanadi started sharply from her thoughts, throwing stars sliding into her hands as she turned to face the window and the cloaked person sitting there. Just moments ago she had sent Brundarad to check all the rooms in their wing, so she faced the

intruder alone.

"Hsahhh! Is that any way to greet me?" Talons pulled her hood back.

"Little scamp you are," Hanadi said, sheathing her daggers. "What is it you are doing here?"

Talons told her the story. Hanadi listened in silence, her face growing steadily more grim. "I cannot believe Archer is dead... She was always so skilled."

"I watched the shifter and his bears tear her apart. She counted for two of them."

"And those letters? Who was it sent them?" Hanadi demanded.

"I assume it was Sorrow or Laeth, the shifter versions." Talons pulled five slender sealed packages from beneath her cloak, handed them to Hanadi, and reached back for the last, which was open. "I took captives. Grandsire interrogated them. They're identical," she said, nodding at the packages. "The open one is for you. Get them in the right hands immediately. This is the last five. Everyone else who needs to has them. I'll find you again in Rowan." Talons turned in the windows. "Back to the war," she said and dropped out of sight.

Hanadi read just the first few pages before stalking out the door. "Sa'necari. Lots of sa'necari," she muttered uncharacteristically. She spotted Tagalong walking ahead of her. "Tag! You, Tag!"

Tagalong cocked her head as she turned, catching the odd note in Hanadi's voice. "What's up?"

"This is, that's what," Hanadi shoved the open document into Tagalong's hands. "Get Laurelyanne, both read it, then make Aejs read it."

"Aejys is sleeping..."

"Wake her!"

Tagalong blinked. "Okay."

"How do I find the Mar'ajan?"

"Dunno. Haven't been in Iarwind in years."

"Hmnp!" Hanadi snorted, then whistled for Brundarad. The huge animal came trotting out of a distant room "Geoa Odaren," she said and Brundarad dashed off with Hanadi trotting at his side.

\* \* \* \*

Tagalong, Laurelyanne and Aejs sat on the huge bed in the lapsed paladin's room, passing the pages of the document from one to the other. Several branches of candles burned on the tables to illuminate the room.

"The war is not over," a voice said softly, turning all eyes.

Aejys' eyes widened, she pushed off the bed, dropping to one knee. "Your Majesty!" She caught Zaren Asharen's gloved hand, touching first her forehead and then her lips to the back.

"Up," Zaren said. "No one knows I'm here, save you and the Mar'ajan."

Zaren Asharen was blade thin and hard. She moved with an economy of motion, nothing wasted, to sit on the chair farthest from the door. Although very young by Sharani standards, barely forty, there was already white in her hair: in some ways the war had been harder on her than on many others. She had had to play a dangerous game of cat and mouse as she ferreted out the traitors in her ma'aram's court and later in her own and then battle a coup and a war that nearly overwhelmed first her city and then her country. She had failed to save her ma'aram and very nearly herself. It had left her a master of the game.

Geoa closed the door as she stepped in.

"I've come to ask that you take no overt action against Margren until we can round up all the traitors in each of the Mar'ajantes."

"There's only three weeks 'til solstice," Tag said pointedly. "Any one ya ain't caught by then..."

Zaren nodded at the dwarf. "If Margren's still loose day before solstice, you may kill her on sight. I've had martial law clamped down on every major city, town, all the places named in this document – except Rowanslea. Kaethreyn will not listen to me. She has disregarded the copy of those documents I sent her. I'm sending Geoa to deal with her. I'd like to avoid civil war with Rowanslea, but Margren has Kaethreyn's ear. You must talk to her, Aejs, make your ma'aram see sense. Otherwise, Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan and his sa'necari and his necari, living and undead alike, will slip through our nets."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN. THE FINAL BETRAYAL

Talons rejoined Blackbird in Rowan City the night after she spoke to Hanadi in Yarrendar. They sat in the upstairs sitting room of a small inn near the west wall, a section of the city occupied mainly by mid level tradesmyn who worked for other masters. With trade winding down for the winter they had no trouble renting the entire floor.

Oil lamps on side tables and one on the center table cast a dancing light across them. Blackbird propped her bad leg up on a chair. She wore nice russet colored wool trousers and a matching tunic with grain sheaves embroidered on the sleeves and neck, the first new clothes she had had in many years. Jysy and Arruth lounged on a pair of comfortably overstuffed couches, looking bored. Like their ma'aram, they wore new clothes, blue and green wool, soft, warm, and comfortable. Birdie and Lizard sat at the round table with Blackbird and Talons. Now and then Birdie's hands would wander down to her stomach; feeling for the child even though she knew it would still be several months before she would feel anything there.

Talons looked very tired and worn, lines of pain in every feature whenever she let down her guard as she did in Blackbird's presence in the privacy of their rooms. Concealing her wounds from Hanadi had taken great effort and now she was paying for it.

Blackbird poured a golden tincture into a small glass, passing it to Talons. "I know you're hurting. This will help."

Talons managed a small smile of acceptance. She took the glass, downing it in one swallow. Warmth spread through her body, easing the pain back but not the exhaustion. "Grandsire has named you an ally. That is very rare," Talons told her quietly. "And Grandsire wishes to recruit some of the children. Will you allow it?"

Blackbird nodded. "Yes. My blessing on it. You're good people."

Talons gave her a long sidewise glance. "Assassins are not good people. But neither are we in league with Bellocar."

"Honorable then," Blackbird said.

Talons smiled in a long, sardonic twist. "Honor among assassins? We live by rules. Honor?" Talons said, waxing unexpectedly philosophical, nearly dying had started her thinking in ways she had not before. "What is that?"

Blackbird shook her head. "Now are you putting me on or are you putting me on?"

"Seriously," she said, leaning closer to Blackbird. "I've been wondering. What is honor?"

Blackbird, crippled former knight, child of the streets and vice, said simply, "A set of rules you live your life by."

Talons shook her head. "You're right in my head... But not in my heart. In my heart, I'm not certain anything is still there."

Blackbird shook her grizzled head. "Don't start questioning until this job is done."

It'll make you slow."

Talons gave another small smile with her lips, but her eyes were distant and cold as ice. "Nothing makes me slow. I now have more than fifty kills to my name and I'll make it hundreds more before I'll let Margren take this realm."

"The other mar'ajantes have clamped down hard?"

Talons nodded. "Only Rowanslea is refusing to act on my Grandsire's documents."

"I've already had the kids on the streets. There are a lot of people don't like Margren."

"Rumor is buzzing like a hornet's nest," Birdie said softly. "I told several people I know about what happened in Armaten."

Talons shot her a sharp look.

"Discretely. I left you out," Birdie added.

"Good."

"Tomorrow," Blackbird told them, "we let the other shoe drop. We'll be telling them that Aejs is dead, slain by Margren and that she's planning a violent coup. How long till they find out otherwise ... about Aejs, I mean."

"It will take the Odaren about five days to get here."

"She'll have Aejs with her."

Talons' face went still colder. "Don't count on Aejs arriving."

"What do you mean?" Lizard demanded sharply, reaching for the comfort of Birdie's hand as he did.

"Do you really believe that Margren will let Aejs enter the city without taking another shot at her?"

Jysy and Arruth came erect, leaning toward the table.

"There isn't anything I can do to stop her without compromising everything we've done so far," Talons said. "This close to her seat of power, I do not believe she will fail again."

"Your people fight hard to get her here and then you just let her die?" Blackbird demanded, her voice going hoarse.

"We're not allowing anything. I simply don't believe there is anything more to be done for her. We must save Shaurone. That is the first priority."

Blackbird nodded grimly. "It's down to hard choices then."

"Yes, it is."

\* \* \* \*

Within two days Rowan City began to burn. Rioting began in the poor quarter and spread through the streets. Every one who did business with Margren or was accused of it was dragged from their homes and businesses by angry mobs, beaten to death and their buildings fired. Whole streets burned as the fires raged uncontrolled. Innocents died along with the guilty. Kaethreyn doubled the guards and patrols, but by the fourth day many of those guards and soldiers were joining in the violence or falling victim to it. By the fifth, Kaethreyn declared martial law, enforced curfews and forbade public gatherings – but the violence did not slack.

\* \* \* \*

Geoa Odaren called a halt to their march half a day from Rowan City as full darkness fell. Camp was quickly set up despite Aejys' insistence on continuing to the city. They had left Tamlestari behind, safely ensconced in her lasah's castle. That relieved Aejys' mind and as she dismounted beside her tent she felt the burden of her lover's safety lifted from her heart. They were nearly there. Since learning of Ladonys and Laeoli's deaths, she had slept each night, but woke still tired and unrested. She felt numb most of the time. Tagalong and Laurelyanne were ever at her side each day, leaving her only when they were certain that she had fallen asleep. She had scarcely spoken to anyone in days now. She had her sorrow under control enough to present a stolid face to everyone, but no one could police her dreams where she saw her family laying dead before her. She had left them behind when she fled seven years ago, thinking them safe, and now they were dead and she could not stop blaming herself, running haunted what if's through her mind over and over again.

She settled on her cot, pulled her pipe out and smoked for just a couple of breaths before putting it aside because she found no comfort in it. Aejys pulled a bottle of whiskey from her saddlebags, popped the cork, and began to drink it straight. When her brain began to fog, she laid back and slept.

\* \* \* \*

Tamlestari sat before the fire in her room, her gloved hands carefully fitting the death runed arrowheads to new shafts. She bound them with gut and then hooded each arrow with a black silken cover. She knew why Aejys had driven her off, rejected her – that Aejys feared for her safety and their children's' – but her heart was heavy. Tears ran freely down her face. She pulled her gloves off, wiping her cheeks



and eyes. The children rolled in her womb, kicking her in tiny jerks. She slid the arrows into a new quiver she had bought just for them. Then she folded her hands across her swelling belly, feeling the kicks with her hands. New life. Feeling them comforted her amidst all the death that had followed her on the road. "Aejys, Aejys, please come back to me, to us."

If Margren harmed Aejys these arrows would surely kill her. Tamlestari could more and more easily imagine shooting Margren with the death runed arrows. Whatever Margren had become, she would die.

\* \* \* \*

Disaster came silently in the night while the camp slept. Force had failed Margren, so at Mephistis' urging, they tried stealth instead. Mephistis had been unable to discover whether the nightmare mage who had turned their sending was in the company and had no wish to risk another engagement with him without knowing what he was and where he had come from. Mephistis led three of his most powerful sa'necari to the edge of the encampment. They knelt beside a broad pine, its low hanging branches the perfect concealment, waiting for the watch to pass them. A pair of Sharani knights paused in the moonlight silver gilding the edges of their armor. Mephistis reached out with his power, extending his hand in a brief arcane gesture to snare their minds. Had they been ha'taren, the spell would never have worked, the paladins would have sensed it and resisted. The knights stood, staring out into nothing while a sign from Mephistis sent two sa'necari up behind them. The sa'necari quietly dragged the unresisting knights into their place of concealment and began to feed.

Mephistis nodded to his third and they moved deeper into the camp. The others would feed several times that night; many who slept would not wake. Sooner or later they would encounter ha'taren, of that Mephistis was certain. The other pair had been instructed to avoid the ha'taren, to flee rather than fight. Only Mephistis and his companion, Bodramet, had sufficient power to guarantee victory over a ha'taren not taken by surprise. He would not needlessly risk his sa'necari this early in the final game. Solstice was still a few weeks off and he would need all of them then.

They reached the innermost circle of tents unopposed and unnoticed. Several wynderjyns stirred uneasily as they passed behind them, sensing something but as yet uncertain of its nature, for Mephistis' power cloaked Bodramet and himself almost entirely from their keen senses. He had left nothing to chance, scrying the camp on its march to be certain of which tent housed Aejys. He found the tent easily, slicing the back open with his blade.

Aejys slept in a fog of alcohol. His hands closed on her throat. She woke at his touch with a cry of alarm, twisting and reaching for her sword, which leaned against the head of the cot. Mephistis' hand became talons and he ripped open the half healed wound in her shoulder. Aejys screamed, loosing her sword to the pain.

Mephistis struck her hard in the face, sending her spinning into darkness. He dragged her out the back where he and Bodramet took her arms, rising up and away into the night before anyone in the awakening camp could spot them.

\* \* \* \*

"Who cried out?" Geoa Odaren emerged from her tent, buckling on her sword. Several ha'taren were going from tent to tent, checking.

A cry went up from the perimeter. "Sa'necari! Sa'necari over here!"

A ha'taren put a horn to her lips, sounding the alarm. Six drew swords and headed for the perimeter. Another four moved to Geoa Odaren's side to protect their liege lord. Tagalong came at a rolling trot, scanning the growing crowd. "Where's Aejs?" Geoa's gray eyes met Tagalong's and they both knew the answer.

Tagalong bolted for the tent. She saw the blood on the bedclothes and the slit back. A long howl of wordless grief tore from her throat. Geoa Odaren dropped to her knees beside Tagalong, gripping her shoulders and shaking her. "Where have they taken her?"

"Oh gods, oh gods..." Tagalong sobbed brokenly. She had been so certain when they first set out that she could protect Aejs and now her dearest friend was gone.

"Dragonshead. That is where they have gone," Hanadi spoke archly from the tent entrance, Brundarad pressing in around her legs. "It is Margren's citadel according to the documents."

Geoa shot her a sharp, doubting look. "No one's ever found the way into the underground ruins."

"Hmnp! Margren did," Hanadi said with a contemptuous snort. "And Brundarad can." She ran her hands over the wiry hair on Brundarad's head. "Go, Brundarad, find us a way in."

The shadow hound slid around Hanadi to run. Small hands caught at his fur. He paused, looking down into Grymlyken's tear-streaked yet resolute face. "Take me with you," the pixie said.

Brundarad gave an incredulous snort.

"Someone will need to get inside and find her."

Brundarad lowered his haunches and Grymlyken climbed aboard, settling behind his shoulders. The Shadow hound barked, short and sharp.

"Yeah, I'll hold on tight," Grymlyken said grimly.

They bounded off into the night.

\* \* \* \*

All of Aeijys' units, along with half of Geoa Odaren's, followed Tag and Hanadi, riding hard for Dragonshead, their ouroboros pennon flapping in the breeze. Josh watched them go until they were lost from sight, grief etching the lines in his weather-beaten alcoholic face still deeper and beneath the grief lay a burning anger. He took a swig from his pocket flask which now contained Laurelyanne's brew instead of his usual whiskey, his awareness of the burning sensations in his body faded, but the heat in his heart and soul did not dissipate. Someone had to beard Margren in her den in Castle Rowan and he had chosen that duty for himself. He knew he would recognize her instantly, for he had touched her aura and glimpsed her face when he slammed her against the wall of her unholy sanctum.

Ever since that day when he had begun to open up to Eliahu and Laurelyanne about the terror and anguish of his past, he had also started to feel comfortable with the power. He had always known how to use the power on an instinctual, unconscious level, almost as if he had come into this life fully trained or carried it over from a previous incarnation. Which, he sighed to himself, was probably why it frightened my father so badly. That did not make what his father did right, but it did make it a little easier to accept.

"Josh," Eliahu put his hand on the sailor-mage's arm, pulling him from his musings. "Are you still certain we did the right thing staying behind?" he asked gently, searching the younger man's face. Of the three mages, only Laurelyanne had gone with Tagalong. And Clemmerick had stayed behind to offer what protection he could to Eliahu and Josh.

"Yes," Josh's voice was soft and a little distant. "I sensed an enchantary gate in Dragonshead a moment before I hit Margren. I think it leads to Castle Rowan. Castle Rowan is closer than Dragonshead. If we can find the gate, we may get there before Margren kills Aeijys."

\* \* \* \*

Aeijys came to herself in the hard grip of two stone trolls, dragging her toward a long, wide table arrayed with various implements of torture. For an instant she thought she was back in Bucharsa and a scream welled to the back of her throat to die unreleased when she remembered Mephistis taking her in the Odaren's camp. The stench of blood and mold rose from the straw rustling around her bare feet. She could feel the aura of death lingering in the dank, gray stone walls of the chamber: many people had died here. She raised her head a fraction, seeing Margren standing by the table to her left, a smile of incredible cruelty on her generous lips. Margren held a heavy mace, stroking the blunt head as if it were a favored pet.

"So glad you are awake, sister," Margren purred. "I wanted you to feel this."

Aejys lifted her head fully, staring straight into her face without speaking. She knew she could not break the stone trolls' grip and she would not play the coward by struggling. They shoved her hands and arms up to the elbow on the table, pinning them there.

Margren lifted the mace. "These hands have long offended me," she purred softer still, then laughed as if she had said something witty. She brought the mace down on Aejys' right hand shattering the bones.

Aejys' face twisted as she fought back another scream, determined not to grant Margren the satisfaction of giving vent to her agony.

Margren frowned and broke the other hand. Aejys fainted.

\* \* \* \*

Talons woke Blackbird in the wee hours of the morning, her face a stony mask despite her urgent tone. "Margren has taken Aejys. I'm going to Dragonshead."

"Hell shitting damnation!" Blackbird started awake. The bedclothes slid down around her waist as she sat up. "You're still in rocky shape, Talons. That isn't the smart thing to do."

Talons smiled thinly. "Life has rarely given me choices, my friend."

"Then take one of the girls with you." Blackbird swung her feet over the bed, reaching for her clothes that lay across a chair near the nightstand beside the bed. She realized with a jolt that she had reached with her right hand. In the weeks since Paunys dosed her with Dynanna's elixir she had begun gradually getting some feeling back in her fingers, but to actually reach without thought was more than she had ever hoped for.

"What's wrong?" Talons asked.

"Not wrong. Right. I just moved my hand and arm!"

A small true smile touched Talons' face, and then disappeared. "That is a miracle, my friend. Now wish one for me." She turned, heading for the door.

"Wait. Take one of the girls."

"No," Talons answered without turning. "There are people heading for Dragonshead already. I don't want your girls seen with me. For their sake. Their safety." Then she was out the door and gone before Blackbird could rise to follow her.

With her shadow cape pulled close around her, Talons slipped out of the city unnoticed. Dawn broke as she reached the forest beyond the walls. In a secluded spot, far from any eyes that might watch, she pulled a whistle from her pocket. She blew a single high long note, waiting for three heartbeats before blowing it again. A high shriek responded. Talons raised her head. A saddled gryphon spiraled down toward her. Her grandsire had sent Little Bit to her once he knew that Armaten was clear of Golds.

"You weren't thinking of doing this alone, now were you?" A sweet male tenor asked.

The scent of roses caught her as she spun to face him, claws out. "Dynarien."

The yuwenghau smiled with pleasure. "So you figured out who I am?"

"The Rose Warrior." Her voice was cool, almost casual as she sheathed her claws. "You died back when Shaurone was still a scattered group of squabbling tribes with a common tongue. You and Tros Willodarusson were chasing Waejonan. He got both of you. Willodarus cursed Waejonan for your deaths. That's why Waejontor's forests teem with life, nearly all of it deadly. I asked my grandsire. His priests told him."

"Very good," Dynarien gave her a courtly bow, his midnight blue cloak sliding around his left shoulder. "So, going alone?"

"Not if you want to come."

Dynarien's smile widened. "I must admit a selfish interest. My sister wants the contents of the soul vault."

"Your sister..."

"Uh uh," he wagged a friendly finger at her. "If you have not figured out the true nature of my bond with Dynanna, I am not going to tell you."

"So be it." Talons mounted first and Dynarien sat pillion behind her. She snapped the reins and they rose into the sky, making for Dragonshead. As they reached the bluffs Talons saw the ruins, which had been standing when she visited them months past, strewn in rubble beneath them. "What in Seven Hells?"

"Hell had nothing to do with it," Dynarien said pleasantly. "One of Dynanna's experiments with captured souls was the reincarnation of Josiah Abelard."

Talons glanced sharply at Dynarien. "The Mage Master?"

"Same."

"He did this..."

"Yes."

Talons sent the gryphon spiraling down into a wooded area near the edge of the bluffs.

Dynarien alighted, turning to help Talons dismount he put his hands on her waist.

Talons went completely still, staring pointedly at his hands. "Remove them now or I'll see if gods bleed."

Dynarien raised an eyebrow questioningly as he dropped his hands and stepped back. "As you wish. You are angry with me?"

"I just realized what you did to Birdie." Talons' voice was cold, utterly without feeling, her face was still, betraying nothing. "No. I've seen the way her hands drift to her stomach. She's pregnant. You shoved one of those reclaimed souls inside her."

Dynarien gave her a long appraising look. "Yes. She carries a heroic soul, fit to do battle with the darkness."

"She is just thirteen."

Dynarien's face flushed and he turned his back to Talons. "It was not rape. I have never forced a woman."

"Undue influence then. You're a God, she's a child. With anyone else the kyndi would have prevented her becoming pregnant this young."

"She agreed to have my child... She is strong. I will visit her again after this child is born to give her another. Perhaps many. Dynanna wishes to bring as many heroes as possible back to fight Bellocar. If this is not done, then Bellocar will find a way to kill this world again."

Talons fell silent. She could not argue with that point, despite her concern for Birdie. "From this soul vault?"

"Yes. The soul vault at Dragonshead is the largest that ever existed. Will you help us?"

"Why do you need me?"

"Only a human can open the vault. Dynanna's spies have found the vault, but cannot open it."

"Spies. You have spies inside the citadel?" Her surprise showed in her voice before

she could catch herself.

Dynarien was looking earnestly at her, his expression hopeful. "The catkin. That is how we knew to send Blackbird to rescue you."

Talons fell silent again, thinking and remembering that day on the bluffs, replaying it and inserting the new pieces. Because the catkin had seen her, her life had been saved... "Yes, I will help you, but only if you swear to give some of those souls to the Guild."

Dynarien's face lit up with eagerness and pleasure. "Do you want one? I carry three with me now. I could give you a very, very powerful child."

His long fingers brushed her cheek, sending an electric heat through her, setting her loins tingling. "Shit." Talons retreated, certain that if he kept that up she would be climbing out of her clothes before she could stop herself.

He reached for her again. "I could give you greater pleasure than any man you have ever known or ever will know."

"No," Talons said flatly, moving still farther from him. "Just tell me who carries them when the deeds are done so I can find the children."

"What would you then? Tell your grandsire?"

"I would keep it to myself, taking a personal interest in the children and their education."

"One hundred souls," Dynarien offered, adding, "And the touch of your lips."

"Ten percent and you keep your hands to yourself," Talons shot back at him.

Dynarien gave a small disappointed shrug. "So be it." Then his face brightened again and he said, "Another time, maybe?"

"No!"

\* \* \* \*

It took half a day for Geoa Odaren to see to the burying of her dead, making it early evening when they reached Rowan City. Eliahu no longer pretended to be anything that he was not, riding at the Mar'ajan's side in his full regalia as the High Mage of Winter: He wore a mid-calf robe of a deep blue-violet velvet; black leather boots lined with sheepskin, a cuff turned down to show the violet dyed fleece; and a heavy wolverine fur cloak. The end of CallThunder rested in the lance boot, casting a fine white glow from the tip. Josh rode just behind them with Clemmerick walking beside him.

The captain of the city guard came down herself when Geoa's banner was first sighted and was waiting for them when they arrived. The woman looked worn and weary in her blue surcoat which was heavily creased from sleeping in it, her face was lined and smudged with sooty streaks where she had simply tried to wipe it off rather than take time to procure water and soap. Geoa Odaren frowned, looking from the captain to the smoke rising in a dozen places – testament to burning buildings and civil unrest.

"What happens here, Captain?" Geoa asked quietly.

"That's what our Mar'ajan is asking everyone..."

"I am here on behalf of the saer'ajan. If you know any more about this, you must tell me now. If it impacts on my mission and you don't tell me, it will go hard on you."

"Yes, Lord," the captain said with a touch of nervousness in her voice, glancing down the line of troops as if looking for someone. "It seems there are rumors going round that the Ajan Margrenan murdered the Lion of Rowanslea. Any and everyone who has ever done business with her, or is even suspected of having dealt with her, are being hauled from their homes and murdered by vigilantes." She craned her head still farther, her eyes searching Geoa's ranks with an expression of increasing desperation. "She is with you, isn't she?"

"She?" Geoa asked mildly.

"The Lion of Rowanslea. She was supposed to be with you."

So rumor has run ahead of us, Eliahu mused.

"She was," Geoa told her, a hard edge lining her words. "She was taken by sa'necari yesterday. She may be dead by now. At least that is our fears."

The captain stared up at Geoa, looking stunned and shaking her head. "We'll never be able to contain the violence. Never."

"You will do your best, captain." Geoa said sharply.

"Yeah. Yeah, I will." But she did not sound at all certain that her best would be good enough.

Geoa's complement of twenty knights and six ha'taren rode slowly past the troubled captain and down into the streets toward Castle Rowan at the city's center. Eliahu counted six burned-out houses, two blocks of homes and businesses in charred ruins, and seven bodies still tied to stakes amid the crumbling ashes of the fires that had consumed them and then he simply stopped counting because sick horror had set in and nausea had begun in the pit of his stomach.



Nearing the castle, they were halted by ten bradae, warrior priests of Aroana dressed for war. The priests wore mail shirts and gleaming breast plates with the Aroanan Rune drawn large upon them, over long blood crimson robes, a color that would never let anyone see them bleed. They carried heavy pikes, crossing them in front of Geoa Odaren's party.

Geoa signed a halt, dismounting. The nearest priest, a tall grim-faced mon nodded toward a wrought iron gate set between tall white stone crenellated walls. Sonden, High Priest over all the Aroanan temples in Shaurone, came down the flagstoned walk. His ankle length black hair was braided and curled into a coronet atop his head. Like his priests, he wore mail and a breastplate over his somber black robes. The strap of his black medicine satchel crossed his chest from left to right and he carried a runed silver fighting staff.

"These are troubled times, old friend," he said to Geoa. They embraced briefly, informally.

"They are indeed." Geoa saw the dark circles beneath his eyes and the troubled light in their dark brown depths.

"I thought you might have need of me. Where is Aejs?"

Geoa told him.

A soul-deep weariness stole across his face with the grief. "I tried everything I could think of – within the boundaries of convention – and failed utterly."

Geoa pulled the packet that she had been given by Hanadi from her pouch, handing them to him. Sonden glanced at them, and then stared past her, much of the weariness left his face, replaced by pleasure and surprise. Geoa turned to find Josh standing behind her.

Sonden went to Josh, reaching and then hesitating like a child remembering his manners. "Josiah Abelard! You were Josiah Abelard. Is it all right if I touch you?"

Josh sucked an uncertain breath as deeply as he could take it before nodding. He had finally found Abelard, the mage who had been chasing him through his dreams, and it was himself. A name rose in his mind and he spoke it, "Sonden. Of course it is." Josh extended his right hand to Sonden, sliding his left into his pocket to rub the stopper of a bottle of whiskey as if it were a magic talisman.

Sonden grasped Josh's hand firmly, quickly Reading the damage that years of hard drinking had done to the sailor's body. His brow furrowed as he looked into Josh's face, seeing the pain there, then he went just a little deeper: The magic was a roaring fire in Josh's core, as powerful as ever, possibly more so, but strangely twisted in a way that Sonden, in all his incarnations had never seen before.

Josh abruptly pulled away from Sonden, fleeing back to the horses. He pressed his face against his mount's shoulder, feeling suddenly ashamed of the need rising up in his throat for a taste of the whiskey. "Shit, shit, shit," Josh muttered, dragging the bottle from his pocket. He knew he should have reached for Laurelyanne's brew in his breast pocket instead of the whiskey, but he could not stop himself. He shook hard as he brought the bottle to his lips, sucking the burning liquor down his throat in great gulping swallows. His stomach roiled and for a moment the whiskey seemed ready to come spewing back out. Josh fought to still his heaving stomach. Comforting warmth flooded his veins and muscles as he felt the liquor flow down his throat. His face flushed with rising heat even as calm settled through his mind and body.

Eliahu had dismounted and come around the horses to check on Josh so he saw the bottle returning to the sot's pocket. He ignored that, touching Josh's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Josh nodded, mounting.

Eliahu looked then to Geoa and Sonden, starting toward them. "What did you do?" he asked Sonden quietly.

"I did not mean to upset him," Sonden told him. "I did not expect to find the reincarnation of Josiah Abelard in these lands, much less in such a damaged state."

"Josiah Abelard?" Eliahu breathed the word in shocked incredulity. He remembered the tremendous power Josh had shown in that Valdren cave, seeing the possibility that Sonden was right. "The greatest mage the City of Magic ever produced ... is an alcoholic sailor."

"With all of his gifts and knowledge intact," Sonden added. "He is not accessing them right, the channels are blocked in places where they should be open and opened in places they should be closed."

Eliahu considered that. "Let me walk with you," Eliahu told him, "And I will tell you what little I know about how Josh came to be as you find him."

\* \* \* \*

"Your mage nearly killed me, Aejys," Margren snarled, the whip in her hand flicked out striking Aejys' bare back, making the lapsed paladin's body jerk at the pain.

Aejys' back was slowly turning into a bloody ruin. Margren had been beating her for hours. Her hair hung in lank sweat-drenched, blood-crusting strings around her bruised and bleeding face. Stripped to the waist, Aejys hung from the ceiling in chains, arms and feet spread, tight metal bands cutting into her wrists and ankles.

"That's what you brought him here for? Isn't it? To kill me?" Margren struck her again. "What is his name? His lineage? What school does he follow?" She punctuated each question with a blow of the whip.

Aejys' consciousness slid away from the agony, there was no place else and no one else left that she could turn to now, so in a distant corner of her mind she began to pray:

Aroana, God of my Heart,  
To thee I commend my soul,  
My heart and mind,  
And the fullness of my being.  
Oh, Wisdom born of Memory,  
Knowledge gleaned from Forethought,  
Secure me in thy ways,  
Guide me through the fields of Death  
So that my courage will not falter,  
But trust in thy goodness...

As if she sensed where Aejys' mind had gone, Margren began to shriek wordlessly, striking again and again with increasing violence, the lash cutting deeper and deeper into Aejys' back, the lapsed paladin's body jerking in her bonds with each strike. "I hate you! I hate you!" Margren screamed as she saw Aejys' body sag into unconsciousness.

A soft, long fingered hand caught the whip, gently but firmly prying it from Margren's hands as he turned her toward him. His lips found Margren's and he kissed her deeply, lingering for several moments on her mouth.

She pulled back to speak and catch her breath, pressing her blood stained hands to his bare chest. "Mephistis. How long have you been here?"

"A heartbeat and no more, my love. Geoa Odaren has entered the city with three of Aejys' people. You must go back to the castle."

"Which ones? Which ones did she bring?" Margren allowed herself to be led out into the hallway as they spoke.

"The ogre, the winter mage, and his drunken apprentice."

"And the mage that hit me?"

"Margren, I have scryed their camp for weeks now. The only other mage is that Valdren earthmage. None of them have the kind of power that hit Dragonshead three weeks ago. It must have been a fireborn. One that I was not aware of before. After all, my dearest, you attacked Aejs in their realm."

\* \* \* \*

Aejys' spirit knelt in a field of fragrant grasses, both sweet and sharp, that seemed to stretch to infinity around her. Flowers sprinkled the field in myriad shades of vibrant blues and reds. A deep serenity wrapped around and within her. She felt completely at peace for the first time since childhood. In this place she was ha'taren again, praying with absolute trust and faith, walking the path of ritual in her mind because she had neither tools nor altar.

"Aejys," a mon's voice called to her, strong yet melodious. "You have returned to me at last."

Aejys raised her eyes up. "Yes, My Lord."

The mon was dressed in shining white with a double-bladed axe hanging at one hip and a sword at her other, a shield at her back. Aroana gripped Aejs' shoulders, bringing her to her feet. "Beloved favorite, you are in a place where I cannot go. Just as you were in Bucharsa."

"I know, Lord. I accept that." Aejs' heart was calm, her nerve steady.

"Help is coming. But you may die before they can reach you."

Aejys nodded slowly. "So be it. At least I die with my God in my heart."

Aroana smiled sadly, kissing Aejs' forehead. "Then your soul will be with me in Haven, beloved favorite." The God kissed Aejs once more. "Now go back to your body," she said and Aejs was whirled away into darkness once more.

\* \* \* \*

Mephistis walked among the tumbled ruins atop Dragonshead, only the two walls sheltered by the twisted willow tree where he and Margren sometimes met to make love remained standing. The rest was wind-sifted debris, stirring even then in the evening breeze. The mage that hit us... I've never felt such power... What if the stirring in the ether two hours ago was he? Could he have come with Aejs without my sensing him? But how could he have hidden from me? What is he? Who is he?

"My love?"

He turned as Margren crossed the rubble-strewn field toward him. She wore a long crimson velvet tunic with a sable cloak about her shoulders. Mephistis gathered her into his arms, content to just hold her for a long time. When he drew back at last, as full dark settled around them, Margren could feel the tension in his body. "What is wrong?"

He could think of no delicate way to put it, so he just said it, "I think the mage that did this," he swept his hand at the toppled ruins, "has entered the city."

Margren trembled violently, her eyes widening in fear, "That cannot be. It just cannot."

Mephistis grasped her shoulders to steady her; "We must finish the rite before morning. And I must have the death gift..."

"You promised it to me. You said it would be mine." Margren pulled away from him, a small flash of anger burning away her moment of fear.

"My love," Mephistis' tone turned urgent. "I will need every bit of power and strength I can draw on to protect you from this mage."

Margren softened immediately, going into his arms and pressing her face against his chest, feeling very safe and sheltered there. "So be it. You can have Aeijys' death gift."

\* \* \* \*

Kaethreyn had left them waiting in an ante-chamber and by the time Geoa and Sonden gained their little party a meeting with her, Josh reeked of whiskey, his eyes were reddened and bloodshot and his stride a trifle unsteady. Eliahu walked with his arm linked in Josh's, trying to lend him some support, but there was no concealing his heavily intoxicated state.

Mirrors lined the far wall of Kaethreyn's private study to catch and reflect the sunlight by day and the lamps by night, increasing the illumination by nearly one hundred percent. A long couch underlined the wide windows with soft down stuffed chairs, a deep rose silk brocaded with water lilies, clustered around a desk near the fireplace in the northwest corner.

Kaethreyn rose from her seat, frowning, as they entered. "If you have come about my daughter, then you can leave my city immediately." She snatched up a small pile of papers, throwing them at Geoa's feet. "I'll not surrender my child on the basis of these preposterous accusations!"

Geoa ignored the papers, her gray eyes hardening. "Last night, Aeijys was stolen

from my camp by a band of sa'necari. You know what they do to their captives."

Kaethreyn's face drained of color and she sank heavily into her chair, shaking her head slowly in silent denial.

Geoa stalked to the desk, leaning her face close to Kaethreyn's, emphasizing each unrelenting word. "She's dead or dying by now – with half her soul missing."

As Geoa's words sliced into Kaethreyn, they also cut into Josh. He pulled away from Eliahu, shaking violently. He clasped his hands together, pressing them tightly to his stomach, visibly struggling to breathe.

"Give us Margren," Geoa demanded.

"Margren had nothing to do with this!" Kaethreyn flared. "Stop blaming her."

"Let's ask her."

"She's not her sister's keeper. She doesn't know anything." Uncertainty crept into Kaethreyn's voice even as she repeated her denials, and abruptly she turned from defending to pleading. "You can't take her. She's all I have left now."

"If you don't surrender her and all persons named in this document," Geoa pivoted, scooping up the papers and laying them in front of her, "then the saer'ajan will be forced to declare you and yours outlaw. She will bring all the might of the realm against you. She will crush you like this!" Geoa snapped her fingers under Kaethreyn's nose.

The snap penetrated Josh's pained thoughts. He spun with a gesture at the mirrors. Blue light poured from his fingers, enveloping the silver-backed glass. When the light faded the mirrors no longer reflected the room. Instead they showed Aejs hanging in chains on the topmost tier of the altar of hecatomb as Margren shoved a dagger into her stomach.

Kaethreyn screamed. Geoa seized Kaethreyn's robe, dragging her over the desk. Before the stricken mar'ajan could react to Geoa's grip, the Odaren had her across the room, shoving her face against the mirror, forcing her to look closely at her dying child as Margren continued to stab her, then play in her blood.

"Now do you believe?" Geoa demanded harshly.

"Yes," Kaethreyn sobbed.

Geoa turned hard eyes on Josh. "Is there a way to reach Aejs?"

Josh nodded, swallowing back his own grief and shock. He took the whiskey from his pocket, taking a long pull from the bottle. "There is a enchantary gate in the

castle. I'll split it and bring it here."

Again the blue light extended from Josh's hands, this time to the central mirror only. Power swirled and cleared. The scene in the chamber of hecatomb now repeated itself in miniature on the central while continuing to play across the others. If there had been any doubt in Eliahu's mind that Josh was the reincarnation of Josiah Abelard, it ended then.

"We'll need more arms," Geoa told Kaethreyn. "Get hold of yourself!"

Kaethreyn straightened, drawing herself in, breathing deeply.

Sonden, who had remained silent through Kaethreyn's emotional ordeal, stepped to her side. "The Odaren must stay here with her forces in case anything goes wrong."

Kaethreyn nodded. "I'm going with you." She went to the door, calling in her four guards, the bradae, and Clemmerick. "Will this be enough?"

"Yes," Sonden responded. "We are going in there, get Aejs, and come back. That is all." As he started to step through the portal Kaethreyn shoved him aside, stepping through first.

\* \* \* \*

Isranon wrapped himself tighter in his fur-lined cloak, moving quickly through the corridors of Dragonshead. Another rite today. Always another rite. His senses had grown more sensitive to them since Rose's death. There were times when he wished that terrible mage who had knocked down the ruins and cracked the citadel had crushed them all. Dane had left and Isranon's loneliness had become a complete desolation of the spirit. He never fed from the same nibari twice in a row. He promised himself that he would never allow his emotions to become engaged with anyone for the rest of his life.

"Running away again?" asked a silky voice.

Isranon stiffened, his eyes narrowing as he turned, his head at a proud tilt and his shoulders back. "Mei ajan?" He carefully used the Sharani title as a small deference to her rank and her relationship to his prince. It also served to put distance between them.

Margren, stalked along the corridor to circle him, deliberately menacing. "My sister dies soon. You're certain you do not wish to celebrate the joyful event with us? To watch me play in her blood? To perhaps drink a chalice or two of it with us? Consecrated blood is quite delicious."

Isranon simply stared, refusing to answer.

Margren slowed when she reached him, eyeing him closely like a lion at a potential meal, always trying to see if she could make him squirm. He never did and that angered her. Her fangs lengthened and she hissed at him. "You don't like me, do you?"

Isranon remained stonily silent. He pitied Margren's na'halaef, Juldrid. Isranon wished he dared to spit in Margren's face, but held himself back.

Margren snarled at him. "One day I'll kill you just to see what your blood tastes like."

"Margren!" Mephistis came down the corridor followed by two stone trolls dragging a battered woman. Isranon sucked in a deep breath, trying not to look at her: it was the paladin, Margren's sister. Margren grabbed the woman's hair, twisting her head back. As she did, Isranon's eyes met the paladin's and he flinched. Through all that pain and suffering, even knowing that she was about to die, the paladin was not broken; her faith in her god was that strong. He had never seen anything like it. Isranon knew almost nothing of the gods of light, the outlands gods, the gods of the realm in which the underground citadel was hidden. He knew only of the Hellgod that was worshipped and propitiated – depending upon one's feeling toward Bellocar – in Waejontor, his homeland. Isranon wondered at what he saw in the paladin's eyes. Was it trust? Trust in her god? What was the paladin's name? Aejs? Aejstrys? There was nothing he could do here. He wanted to be away from here as quickly as possible.

Margren released her. "Does what I do bother you, Isranon? Are you that twisted?"

Mephistis caught Margren up, speaking in a cajoling tone, "Please, beloved, you promised to leave Isranon alone."

"He's a coward, Mephistis. Half-a-mon. Not a true sa'necari at all."

Mephistis kissed her. "Margren, you promised me and you always keep your promises, now don't you?"

"Yes. Yes, I do," she said, allowing him to bring her along with the others and they swept toward the Chamber of Hecatomb.

If it were not Margren who killed him, it would be another. At least in that much Isranon did not lie to himself. The sa'necari always killed the members of his family when they discovered them either because of who they were or because they refused to embrace the dark rites. He walked on, trying not to think about any of it.

\* \* \* \*

So, this is how it ends, Aejs thought without bitterness. They had stripped away the last vestiges of her clothing, bound her arms to the scaffolding and manacled her



wide spread feet to the floor on the topmost tier of the altar of hecatomb. It would be a small rite; there were only six sa'necari acolytes besides Margren and Mephistis. Two stone trolls stood beside the closed doors at the chambers' base. Aejs saw then that the whites as well as the pupils and irises of Margren's eyes had turned a bloody violet: she was sa'necari.

Margrenan brye Rowan stood before Aejs, flanked by her Waejontori lover and a servant bearing a tray. In the middle of the tray sat a golden chalice marked with arcane symbols and two tiny decanters: one held a black liquid, the other an evil green. She carried a long bladed knife marked with black runes on the hilt and along the blood groove.

A voice whispered in Aejs' mind: Be brave, my paladin. Do not fear this death. For your death is her doom.

"You know what this is?" Margren asked coyly, holding the Blade of Nine Souls before her face.

"Yes," Aejs answered, her blood going cold in her veins as she recognized the baneblade. She would die unclean, rise as undead, a living soul in a rotting body, feeding on her own people. Strangely, this time it did not frighten her. She trusted her God to see that she did not rise, that her soul was freed. "I've been cut with one before."

"That's right. You have." Margren stroked the patterned scars on Aejs' right shoulder "I made this one myself. Isn't that clever? Now that it's finished I need to blood it." She stroked the blade across Aejs' stomach. "I thought you would be perfect for that. I've kept it virgin just for you."

Aejs said softly without anger "Our ma'aram loves you. You are unworthy."

Margren backhanded her, "Lying filthy gritchin! You stole our ma'aram's love from me!" She calmed instantly, stroking Aejs' stomach with the blade again. "There is nothing so painful as a gut wound. Done right it takes hours or even days to die. I always do things right."

"My death is your doom. My God will have justice."

Margren exchanged an amused smile with Mephistis. "Not this time, sister. You will never hurt me again."

Mephistis poured a measure from each decanter into the chalice and began to make passes across it, chanting softly.

She seized Aejs' hair, forcing her face forward until her chin pressed her chest. "Watch, sister. Watch it go in." Aejs closed her eyes. Margren shook her savagely. "Watch!"

Anticipation sent electric shivers up Margren's arms and down her thighs, wetness gathered between her loins, her pulse raced and a sweet pressure began in her own stomach. Her breathing quickened until she was panting with eagerness and need.

Aejys opened her eyes looking on the blade pressing in just above her navel. She sucked in a breath, bracing herself for the pain. "I'm watching," she said, but she focused past the blade into a far corner of her mind. Brendorn, we'll be together soon.

"Good." Margren slipped the blade in almost gently, yet firmly, hungrily, almost like a lover. A long, low moan of ecstasy slid from the center of Margren's being, up through her throat, emerging from her lips. She swayed for a moment, half pressing her body against Aejys', then abruptly pulled back, giving the blade a wide ripping twist to the side. Aejys screamed, stiffening, then convulsing in her bonds. Her head twisted back. The lines around her mouth deepened. Her eyes glazed as shock set in. The death magics burned through her veins like a terrible venom. Yet she reached for her prayers with her thoughts, framing each word in her mind; reaching past the pain of her death wound; reaching for her God.

Margren worked the blade upward in a series of small vicious jerks, savoring the way Aejys' body spasmed and shuddered with each turn of the blade, the way she screamed. The blade grated against the paladin's breastbone. Margren pulled the blade free bringing blood and bits of entrails with it. She smiled, contentment filling her to over-flowing. She glanced down at the blade in her hand, quivering now at the thought of putting it into Aejys' body again and again and again. She slid the blade into Aejys' chest on the right side, slitting her from shoulder to nipple.

"Enough, beloved," Mephistis whispered, his hand closing firmly over Margren's as she pulled the blade free. "It is time to drink for the rite..."

Margren turned adoring eyes, glazed with ecstasy to his. "It feels sooooo good. Just once more."

Mephistis smiled. "All right, one more, but she must die with me inside her."

"Yes," Margren replied, shivering delightedly. "I would stay and watch, but I must be at court soon. Come to me later, wrapped in her blood."

"As you wish." Mephistis nodded at the blade. "Now do it."

Margren considered for a moment, then slammed the blade hard into Aejys' chest, two inches past her heart. She left the blade there, stepping back to regard the way the hilt glinted in the light as it stood out from Aejys' dark body, like an artist regarding her greatest work.

"Take the blade," Mephistis told her.

"Not now. I want to pull it from her dead body. I want to feel the undeath quickening in her as my hand curls about the hilt," Margren's lips twisted with deep satisfaction at the image she created in her mind.

Mephistis embraced Margren and drew her aside so that his acolytes could reach the dying ha'taren.

An acolyte stepped forward with the chalice lifting it to the stomach wound. As the paladin's blood drained into it the contents began to smoke. Once it filled he stepped back, extending the chalice to Margren.

Margren dipped her fingers in the flow of Aeijys' blood like a child with macabre finger-paints. She pressed her face into the wound, licking at the edges of the severed flesh with a contented sigh. Then she straightened, her face a frightful blood coated mask. Margren laughed. "Now you know how I've felt all these years." She shoved her hand into the gapping wound, her fingers closing on the entrails, pulling a handful out, and then reaching for more. "No," she said abruptly, withdrawing her hand empty, standing back from her sister. "There is no time. I must get back to the castle."

Margren nodded to the acolyte as she took the chalice from his hands. She smiled, lifting the chalice like wine to first sniff its bouquet, then drank it down in one draught. Blood rimed her mouth as she lowered it with a sigh of satiation.

The acolyte pulled a bottle from his cloak, filling it with Aeijys' blood, then stoppered it, and placed it on the tray.

"Yes," Margren sighed again. "That was very good."

Aeijys' head hung down, her eyes glazed with pain and anguish. She no longer screamed, having lost all awareness of herself and surroundings. Margren stroked her face. "You know, my sister, that if a man reaches climax inside you at the moment of your death he gains a piece of your soul and great magical power." Aeijys did not respond. Margren, incensed by her lack of response, hissed, her teeth lengthening. She grabbed Aeijys' long, tangled, blood and dirt-clotted hair, twisting her head back for a strike at her throat.

"No!" Mephistis cried, turning Margren. "You promised me mortgiefan!"

Margren released Aeijys, gave him a curt nod, and swept from the room.

Mephistis watched Margren's departure. With a wave, he sent the acolytes to the next tier down. He dropped his robes, caressing his already erect manhood. He rubbed his body against Aeijys, his fangs descending. A tickle of longing ran down his throat as he imagined the taste of her blood, but he resisted it. His right hand ran up her breast to pause circling, but not touching the blade that Margren had left

impaling her. He would completely control the moment of Aeijstry's death, a twitch of the blade moving it just an inch or two would stop her heart at the instant of his climaxing and he would have the full gift, perhaps as much as half her soul – or more? He sent a thin blade of power into her mind, forcing her back to consciousness. Her eyes opened as he slid his cock into the warm, blood mixed wetness of her womanhood. Margren had cut her just right so that blood filled her uterus and ran down into her vagina, then flowed over her thighs, mingling with her other juices.

"No," Aeijys moaned. Mortgiefan. He was taking the death gift. Her soul would shatter. She would be beyond even her God's help.

"Yes," Mephistis smiled. "I took it from Laeoli, then pushed her dead body back into the water. I took it from Ladonys. Now I will have it from you."

Mephistis gave a contented sigh as he began to match his deepening thrusts to the beat of her struggling, faltering heart. Blood ran from her mouth. He licked it off, then shoved his tongue into her mouth, gathering and sucking up the blood pooling there. He kissed her deeply, hungrily drinking the welling blood. He could feel the explosion gathering in his loins; soon he would spill his seed into her dying body. It was time, Mephistis decided, reaching for the blade.

\* \* \* \*

Kaethreyn drew her sword as she stepped through the portal, rage roaring in her head and heart, banishing her weakness and grief. She saw Mephistis committing a rite of mortgiefan on Aeijys' body and lunged in a single long drive. Her blade entered the sa'necari's right side and emerged from his left. A howl of agony erupted from his lungs as she shoved him off the blade and spun to face his startled acolytes. Mephistis rolled down the tiers. Two acolytes lifted him up, retreating to the north door as the stone trolls strode up the tiers to confront Kaethreyn. A third acolyte drew a dagger, cutting his wrist. He placed his bleeding wound to Mephistis' mouth, urging him to drink, to heal himself with the blood as they escaped through the door.

The rest of the acolytes spread out around the tiers, following the stone trolls up.

Kaethreyn glanced about for the others, expecting Sonden to come through next. Instead Clemmerick roared onto the tier, charging down at the trolls. As he passed, he broke off one of the scaffoldings and drove it like a spear through the nearest troll's throat. The creature staggered, clutching at the pole. Clemmerick slammed his fists into the troll's chest, tumbling him, followed him down, and stomped his face in. Shards of bone, bits of gray oozing tissue and blood splattered the ogre, streaking him with gore. The second troll rammed him. Clemmerick grabbed the troll as he fell and the two huge combatants rolled down the tiers to strike the walls at the base, pounding, gouging and kicking.

The Aroanan priests spilled through next, followed by Sonden, Eliahu, and Josh.

Seeing they were outnumbered, the remaining three acolytes turned to flee. Josh spoke a single word of power. Blue flame engulfed the acolytes and they dropped, shrieking and writhing to the floor. Josh turned, gesturing at the troll still grappling with Clemmerick. Blue flame licked out, striking the creature. Clemmerick threw himself backwards, cursing as the troll exploded into flame. The burning troll staggered to the south door, beating frantically at itself. It tore the door off the hinges, flinging it away, and plunged through, hunting in blind desperation for something to put out the flames that were consuming it faster than it could regenerate.

Clemmerick let it go. He could hear the sounds of battle drawing nearer beyond the south door. He turned away, trudging up the tiers, shouting to Josh, "I think Tag's coming."

Clemmerick saw that Aeijys lay wrapped in Kaethreyn's cloak, her head and shoulders cradled in her ma'aram's arms, a purple stain around her nostrils and lips where Sonden had administered pollendine to dull her pain. Kaethreyn wept, her face pressed against the blood-crusted strings of her daughter's hair. "Aeijstrys. Aeijstrys, forgive me."

Aeijys stirred weakly, her eyes opening. "Ma'aram?" Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

"Aeijys, who did this?" Kaethreyn knew; she had seen it; but she wanted to hear the words, half hoping that what she had seen had not been true, that somehow the mirror scene had lied to her. And by the letter of the law, she needed to hear Aeijys name her murderer so that Margren could be slain out of hand.

"My vow."

"I release you from it."

"Margren." Finally being able to name her enemy and be believed brought Aeijys a measure of peace. Her ma'aram had saved her from mortgiefan. That too gave her peace. It was now all right to die.

Kaethreyn pressed her cheek to Aeijys' head, tears welling again in her eyes as she clutched the shuddering body. Aeijys stiffened, then her chest heaved up and sank back as a convulsion rolled through her and she writhed in its grip. She made small whimpering noises far back in her throat. Her eyes blinked rapidly with the struggle to focus; her chest heaved with each gasping effort to breathe.

"No." A familiar coarse voice spoke, drawing all eyes to the blood splattered dwarf standing on the lowest tier. Tagalong took the tiers at a run to drop to her knees beside her childhood companion. She flicked back Kaethreyn's cloak before anyone could stop her, staring for several seconds at Aeijys' wounds before letting the concealing cloth fall. The enormity of what Margren had done felt like a vise around

Tagalong's heart and a heavy stone in her mid-section. "Damned puddin' head paladin," Tagalong muttered, fighting back tears, "letten 'em butcher ya like a bloody lamb..."

"Ta ...uh, uh..." Aejs struggled for the strength to speak. "T ... aaa ... ghhh. Where. Are. You?"

"Here, Aejs..." Tagalong slipped her hand under Aejs' head, turning it so that the dying paladin could see her.

"Your ... promise." Aejs groaned, her body went taut, the pain glaze depending in her eyes as another convulsion rolled through her. Sonden reached for his vials to give her more pollendine, cursing silently at how terribly they had tortured her.

"I'll keep it."

"It's a good day to die." Aejs' eyes closed. The death magics and her failing body dragged her consciousness down again like dark waters sucking at a drowning man. Her head rolled back and she lay still.

Tagalong gave a choked cry, turning her face to Sonden. "Is she?"

Sonden put his fingers on Aejs' neck, searching her body with all of his senses. "Not yet. Soon." His fingers brushed Tagalong's shoulders in a gesture of comfort.

She shook him loose. "Back off, I don't need yer pity or yer sympathy."

Sonden rocked back on his heels, saying nothing. He glanced about at the mixed units pouring into the chamber, seeing Valdren rangers, a blood bear, a black woman with a spear, dozens of myn in mixed livery, some Odaren, others in Aejs' blue surcoats with the ouroboros, and climbing the tiers at their head came an Euzadi woman with a huge shadow hound walking at her side. "Shardith," he murmured astonished, he had heard of the Shardith, the women of the nomads who bonded with the great shadow hounds. It was a tribute to Aejs' leadership that she had brought such a disparate group together and held it so.

Brundarad sniffed at Aejs' body, nosed back the blue cloak. A quivering noise began far down in his hairy throat, building in a weird crescendo of grief unlike anything the high priest had heard before. It chilled him.

Hanadi's expression was grim and hard as she squatted beside Tagalong. "I feared this from the moment she was taken." Hanadi's hand caressed the top of the Shadow Hound's head. "Go, Brundarad. Hunt. Bring gifts of blood to our mourning." Brundarad's grieving noise changed to a savage growl, he turned away, disappearing into the corridors. Hanadi's lieutenants, Golethyn and Vardric crouched beside her. "A good mon has been slain," she told them, "I want her avenged. Take two prisoners for questioning, Golethyn. Bring me any papers you find. Wipe the rest

out. Kill all of them. Every living thing." Then Hanadi stood, surveying the troops. "Death to traitors! Crush the infamy!" Hanadi shouted angrily.

The units pouring into the chamber of hecatomb echoed the Euzadi Guildsmon's words, clanging swords on shields.

Tagalong snarled, "Vengeance. Paybacks are a bitch."

"Margren may have gone back to the castle," Kaethreyn said.

Tagalong turned, spitting foam in Kaethreyn's face. "Ya killed her."

Kaethreyn wiped her face off, accepting Tagalong's rage because she knew it came from a grief as deep as her own. "Margren did this..."

"Naw," Tagalong snarled savagely. "She just put the blade in, ya killed her with yer fuckin' vow. Ya tied her hands and hung her out ta die."

"I am going to kill Margren," Kaethreyn promised as if that made up for the mistakes she had made that had cost her the lives of her daughter and grandchild and would soon claim the life of her younger daughter also.

"Not if I find her first." Tagalong stood, drawing her weapons. "We're gonna purge Dragonshead," she shouted to the units spread around the base of the tiers and they shouted back: "Death to traitors! Crush the infamy."

Tagalong charged down the tiers and slammed through the north door with Hanadi and their units following on her heels.

\* \* \* \*

The black and crimson robed acolytes and initiates moved in silent procession through the dark tunnels without need of torches or candles, their amaranthine orbs glowing softly. Isranon trailed them, he had barely had time to fall in behind them as they escaped. Two of them carried a litter bearing Mephistis while a third walked beside him letting the prince suck blood from his wrist. When the acolyte stumbled, Mephistis motioned him away. The acolyte moved into the line as another moved to take his place, drawing a runed dagger to open the vein in his wrist and continue feeding their lord back to health.

Mephistis shook his head at the acolyte. "Bodramet," he called.

The initiate leading the procession dropped back to his master's side. He was a large mon, his jet-black hair slicked down into a dozen small braids at the base of his head. "Yes, My Prince?"

"You must get Margren out of the castle before someone kills her."

Bodramet nodded. "And if she is already dead?"

Mephistis' mouth tightened, his eyes hooding. "Bring her body. She will rise." But it would not be the same. The sweet, human aliveness of her would be gone; there would be no more children between them; the undead could not give life. One of his acolytes had seen Juldrid fall to the arrows of a Valdren ranger – his unborn child was dead with her. He comforted himself with the certainty that Aejs had finished dying, that while her followers had saved Shaurone, they had lost their leader.

\* \* \* \*

Clemmerick tucked the cloak securely around Aejs as he lifted her tenderly from Kaethreyn's arms. Something in the way she felt made him turn to the high priest, "Sonden ... she's gone."

Grief showed on the gentle priest's face, as he touched her, finding nothing more than a swiftly cooling body. "She's at peace now." He sketched the Aroanan rune, saying a quick, simple prayer for the dead: There would be time later, if they survived, for a longer rite. He considered the way that Clemmerick had so carefully wrapped her, and then used his own cloak to cover her face and upper body.

Josh called everyone who remained onto the two top tiers, took a long swig from his bottle, and in a flash of blue light transported them all back to Kaethreyn's study.

Clemmerick let out a deep, shuddering unhappy sigh, cradling Aejs like an infant. As he turned to face the room, the cloak came away from her face. Clemmerick froze, swallowing back another heavy sigh before looking at her to straighten the cloak. No sign of the agony in which she died showed on her face – she looked as if she simply slept. That eased the big ogre's heart a little. He pressed his cheek to hers before replacing the cloak. His body shook repeatedly with huge shuddering sighs that were only a heartbeat away from resounding sobs.

Eliahu stood at Clemmerick's left, the lines of his face deep with anguish, his shoulders slumped in defeat. He leaned heavily on CallThunder, transformed by grief from a young man into a very old one. We tried hard to keep you safe, Aejs. We tried so hard! Forgive us.

Three ha'taren sat in chairs turned to view the mirrors, two in Odaren white, and one in Rowan blue. They came to their feet as the company materialized in the room. The Rowanslea ha'taren dropped to one knee before Kaethreyn. "We watched. Margrenan has betrayed us all."

"Yes," Kaethreyn answered, her face a grim, unreadable mask. Her heart had turned to stone and her stomach felt hollow. Margren always seemed so fragile and delicate, so in need of protection and reassurance that Kaethreyn had given her everything she asked for – no matter how extreme those demands were. But Aejs? Aejs had been



her pride and joy – even when she ran away. It had made Kaethreyn angry at first, but as word of Aejys' deeds, especially in destroying the great wyrm filtered back, Kaethreyn could only be that much more proud of her. She had hoped that refusing to let them take Laeoli out of the realm would force Aejys to come home and she could talk her into staying – forgive me. Forgive me what I have done in my pride and arrogance. I will give you your vengeance and your soul will rest, Aejys. I swear it. "Margren must die. I gave her life and I will take it from her. Come with me."

"Wait," Sonden said. "Let me touch each person we meet. There are shifters in Margren's ranks, sa'necari, a myriad of dangers and deceptions."

At Kaethreyn's nod, he touched each of the three ha'taren, confirming their humanity, watching for the tiny telltale changes in their bodies that would signal a lie, as Kaethreyn demanded they state their loyalties.

That done, one of the Odaren's ha'taren spoke up, "Margren has ordered a celebratory breakfast and sent for every noble in the castle."

Kaethreyn's eyebrow arched in suspicion. "To celebrate the Lion of Rowanslea's death," she hissed bitterly.

"She did not say," said the second white clad ha'taren. "But most are not going."

"Geoa Odaren?"

"She went. Said someone had to keep an eye on Margren."

Kaethreyn gave a curt nod. "Then we best get there quickly, the Odaren could be in danger."

She strode through the door. Forty-odd people gathered outside in the hallway, waiting for Kaethreyn's return: soldiers, knights, ha'taren, servants, and assorted nobles. Word of what chanced within the study walls had quietly gone out and Kaethreyn's followers had come. Sonden quickly verified their humanity and loyalties. Then they moved on, marching toward the Great Hall where Margren presided over her twisted celebration. They passed others, Sonden checking them all. Any one who failed his test or tried to flee were quickly and efficiently killed.

Nearly one hundred people poured into the Great Hall behind Kaethreyn. Enough tables to seat over a hundred were set out and piled with food, but less than thirty people were actually there. Six of those people wore Odaren livery.

Clemmerick moved to the nearest trestle table, sweeping it clear in a single move. He laid Aejys tenderly upon the table, and then turned a look of such savage rage and hate on Margren that even a stone troll would have flinched.

Margren came to her feet, her face twisted in fury. "What is the meaning of this?"

she demanded, gesturing at the crowd.

Kaethreyn stalked up the line of tables. She slammed the high table out of her way, sent it tumbling to the side, forcing several knights and guests to spring to their feet and scramble backwards.

"The Lion of Rowanslea is slain," Sonden pitched his voice so that all could hear. "Dragonshead has fallen." He flicked back the cloaks covering her so that all present could see the terrible wounds and evidence of torture.

Geoa's eyes went grim and sad. She thought of Tamlestari, wondering how she could tell her, not just the fact of Aejys' death, but the way of it before someone else did. It would break her heart.

"You murdered her," Kaethreyn hissed into Margren's face. "How could I have been so blind as to not see what you are?"

Margren recoiled instinctively before her ma'aram's wrath. "She made me do it. She forced me to do it. She came here to kill me. It was self-defense."

"You tied her to a pole and tortured her. You gave her to a sa'necari for mortgiefan."

"I didn't! I didn't!" Margren shrieked.

"I killed him. He did not get her soul," Kaethreyn's voice was breaking as she spoke. "She died in Clemmerick's arms as we brought her home."

"Nooooo! Mephistis!" And with just his name, Margren proved her guilt beyond question to everyone present, for there was no one in that room who did not remember the name of the traitor's son, the one who had been born sa'necari. She cringed, weeping brokenly.

"I disown you. I repudiate you. I hate you." Kaethreyn punctuated each sentence with a wad of spittle in Margren's face.

She pulled the Blade of Nine Souls with which Margren had murdered Aejys, plunging it into Margren's heart, slamming her against the wall. Chaos erupted as Margren's body slipped to the floor. Kaethreyn left the blade in Margren's chest, drew her belt knife and knelt beside her. She caught hold of Margren's hair and twisted her head back to cut it off and prevent her rising undead. The knight standing nearest to Margren drew her sword with a cry of grief and outrage. She shoved it into Kaethreyn's back with a twist, and then kicked her off the blade, whirling to face the rest of the room. Kaethreyn fell dying across her slain daughter. Geoa Odaren jumped the over-turned high table, her sword engaging the murderer's blade in a brief dance of steel, before driving it into her throat and killing her.

Josh took another long pull from his whiskey, lifting his hands into the air, the bottle still clutched tightly in his fist, and gave a loud cry. "Within these walls, from highest tower to lowest dungeon, north, south, east, west. All lies now end, all truths revealed."

Blue light surged through the room, rushed down the corridors, erupted through the castle and its grounds, flowed over the walls and, although Josh had not meant it to, it enveloped the city as well, filling every nook and cranny, down to the smallest mouse hole.

The clothing on seven of Margren's guests, including the murderer of Kaethreyn, changed to crimson with the dragon and rowan trees emblazoned on it. Dragon brands burned on their foreheads. Two sets of eyes changed from brown to solid, deepest red-violet: The color of the sa'necari.

A roar went up as Kaethreyn's followers swept over Margren's people, literally ripping them to pieces. Although no one in the Great Hall could hear it yet, battle ensued throughout the castle and in the city streets.

Josh quietly climbed onto the table where Aejys lay, he pulled the cloak away from her face, dropping it on the floor as he gathered her in his arms, weeping brokenly and rocking her back and forth. The magic faded from his awareness, his strength and focus deserted him in the grip of grief, leaving him just a man and very drunk.

Sonden mounted a table at the farthest end of the Great Hall, shouting to be heard. "Follow me. Death to traitors! Crush the infamy!"

The angry crowd followed Sonden out, leaving Josh alone with the dead.

Deep in its maker's stilled heart, the Blade of Nine Souls glowed white. The blade itself shook and began to dissolve. The hilt fell away from the blade, sliding down Margren's body to the floor. A white mist, alive with dancing silver motes of power, snaked across the great hall, pooling beneath the table where Aejys lay.

"The dead cannot raise the dead," a deep male voice whispered by Josh's ear. "You must help us."

The startled man lifted his head to stare dumbfounded at nine glowing ghosts. "Who are you?"

"Ghosts of the blade. Nine lifemages slain to make it. We retain some power, but it fades quickly. You must start her heart by sending your power through it. You must breathe for you both, blow life into her lungs."

The mage-ghost's fingers brushed Josh's temples, showing him what was needed and how to do it. Josh shoved away the remaining cloak, placing his left hand over her heart. He sent a surge of power deep into the unmoving organ, again and again.

Josh tilted her head back, pinching her nose as he pushed air and power into her lungs. Aejys shuddered beneath his touch, her chest jerked and heaved. Then she breathed on her own.

"We can mend the mortal wounds now enough to keep her alive," the ghost said, "but nothing more. Be grateful the death gift was not taken..."

The ghosts sank their insubstantial hands into Aejys' body. Josh watched the wounds close, aging months before his eyes, leaving just another ugly scar among the rest. When he looked up the ghosts were gone. Aejys lay warm in his arms, incredibly weak and still in pain from the rest of her wounds, but alive. Tears of gratitude and relief streamed down the sot's weathered face. The fading magic of the ghosts of the blade had restored the woman he loved to him and for this single moment the damaged man could dare to hold her: the woman whose love he knew he would never win.

Aejys' lips moved. He bent his ear close to hear her. "Take. Me. Home."

Blue light swelled around them and they vanished from Rowanslea.

## EPILOGUE

Dawn had come again before Sonden could return to the great hall. Most of the fighting had ended in the castle, although a few knots of Margren's people still fought to win free and escape. It continued to rage in the city as both the citizenry and soldiers hunted traitors through its streets. Servants dragged the bodies of Margren's slain retainers into the castle yard, stripping and throwing them into a pile for burning. The loyal dead were laid out in a lower hall while the wounded were tended in upper rooms that had been given over to the healers.

Eliahu and Clemmerick walked beside the High Priest with four bradae following. Guards that Sonden had set swung the doors to the great hall open for them. The High Priest had ordered that no one enter and disturb the room until he, himself, could take care of it. At least three of the bodies, including Margren, had been sa'necari, which meant that Sonden would need to take their heads and hearts to prevent their rising as undead in two more nights. He intended to hang Margren's head atop the castle gate, and then burn the rest of her. His bradae would remove Aejys and Kaethreyn's bodies to a place where they would be cared for and prepared to lie in state before burial. He would have to remove Aejys' head and heart to prevent her rising undead and the thought of mutilating her body further sickened him. But he had no choice. It had to be done and, to his mind, should be done with love in full knowledge that he thereby freed her soul.

The table where Aejys' body had lain was empty, the two bloodstained cloaks, which they had covered her with, lay discarded on the floor. Sonden glanced about the chamber. "Josiah! Josiah, where are you?" Worry creased Sonden's face.

The bradae spread out through the chamber, weapons ready. "The traitor's body is gone also," one of them said.

Clemmerick reached the table ahead of him. "Josh took Aejys' body," he said, stabbing a thick index finger at the wood. Two words were burned into the surface:

GONE HOME

The big ogre turned to Sonden. "She wanted to be buried next to Brendorn. Josh knew that."

"Then he's done her spirit a kindness. It's a far emptier world without Aejys in it."

"What about Margren?" asked Eliahu.

"Well," Clemmerick said. "Josh had nothing to do with that one."

Sonden joined his bradae, standing on the blood stained floor where now only Kaethreyn lay. "One of her retainers must have escaped with her body. She'll rise soon. Necari are not usually as dangerous as their living counterpart, but still a force to be reckoned with. Margren will be back."

\* \* \* \*

The catkins nestled around Juldrid and Hah'nah, burrowed deep into the thick straw of a Dynannan hermit's barn, their bodies like a sea of brown and black and white and gray. Hah'nah cradled Juldrid in her arms, kissing and licking her unconscious face trying vainly to rouse her. Lo'ah, the small gray, white-pawed, catkin healer had gotten the barbs out of Juldrid's back with help from the hermit, nothing vital had been hit, yet clearly the minstrel was dying. Hah'nah and the healer both had thoroughly sniffed and licked the wounds, yet could find no sign of poison or drugs, furthermore she knew well that the Valdren did not use such things and it was Valdren arrows they had dug from her body. "My minstrel is so sweet and sensitive, so delicate and profound ... these few months have been so hard on her..." Hah'nah's face jerked up. "Lo'ah," she said suddenly. "She's wishing herself to death. She doesn't want to live. Mephistis and Margren wounded her spirit. She does not realize how deeply we love her."

Lo'ah stopped licking his paw. "If you would keep your minstrel, My Lady," the healer said, "Then you must bring her over. Make her one of us. Transitioning will shake her out of it."

"And her unborn children? What will that do to them?"

The healer shook his brown whiskered face, rubbing a white paw idly across his pink nose. "I don't think it's ever been tried. However, if you do not act, all three will

die."

"Prepare her."

Lo'ah anointed Juldrid with fragrant oils, writing mystic signs on her forehead, palms, and hands. When he finished, the catkins shoved the straw aside, scratching a pentacle and circle on the bare earth around the unconscious minstrel. Hah'nah, in a form midway between cat and human, bent over Juldrid. She flexed her claws, and then raked them deep into Juldrid's left arm. A yowl went up as the tribe began to dance around the circle chanting loudly. They danced long into the night, dropping one by one around the circle in exhausted slumber as morning neared.

Sunlight stole across them from a crack in the door. In the middle of the circle curled a lovely calico cat, nursing a pair of tiny male kittens, one black, one white, and both with a flame-shaped patch of orange hair on their chests.

\* \* \* \*

Tagalong left Rowanslea three days after Aejys died, moving her troops to winter quarters in Iarwind. Geoa Odaren remained behind to help Sonden maintain order until Zaren Asharen could formally appoint one of her nobles to rule since there were no Rowans left alive. Tagalong and Geoa discretely neglected to inform anyone that Tamlestari carried Aejys' children. Better that no one knew any members of the lineage of Rowan survived. As soon as it could be safely managed they both intended to get Tamlestari and the children as far from Shaurone as they could.

Snow fell softly on the windless morning that Tagalong's troops drew rein in the courtyard of Castle Iarwind. Tamlestari stood with her small compliment of Valdren rangers waiting for them. She started forward as Tagalong dismounted, glancing about for Aejys. When she did not see her, she turned to Tagalong. The moment their eyes met, Tamlestari knew that Aejys was dead. She dropped to her knees, weeping, hugging her stomach protectively, feeling the twins move beneath her breasts. Tagalong wrapped her arms around the youth's shoulders, unable to find words, mourning with her.

THE END

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