

# JOURNEY OF THE SACRED KING

## Book II

# SINS OF THE MOTHERS

By

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First Book Edition

TO

My daughter,

Sovay.

"Rape is the ultimate insult. Among my people, we pick ourselves up, go back after the asshole and when we catch him, we cut it off, and hang the little sack—after we tan it—on a string around our necks along with his ears. Mortgiefan, however, is the ultimate evil. Those who commit that we will hunt to the ends of the earth, burn them alive and cast their ashes to the winds."

*—Gaeatyra, a Sharani of the Taladrim*

"Lying to your King will cost your life,

Lying to your God will cost your soul,

Lying to your self will cost you both."

–Old Sharani proverb.

"When sa'necari kill sa'necari, they do it well,"

–Old Waejontori proverb.

## CHAPTER ONE

### HOMECOMING

Every morning before opening the tavern master inspected the place, starting with the common room and bar where most of their business was done. Becca, a bosomy woman with a tiny waist and boyish hips, standing just half past five feet tall, strictly maintained the high standards that were responsible for the Cock and Boar's growing reputation. A triangle of black silk scarf held her chestnut hair back. A narrow sleeved, wide-cuffed scarlet shirt covered her high ample breasts, tucked into the wide waistband of black trousers that fit tight in the seat and loose in the legs, ending in a pair of practical low-heeled black boots. Her hips swayed coquettishly when she moved, more out of habit than advertising though she had done a fair bit of that in less prosperous times, turning tricks to make ends meet. Until late last summer she had worn dresses like the rest of the women in Vorgensburg, but after getting into an "anything you can do, I can do better" match with one of the two female owners of the Cock and Boar, which involved unloading a wagon load of supplies, she had been forced to admit the practicality of pants, bought her first pair and discovered she liked them. Now there were no dresses in her entire wardrobe. Giving away her dresses, many of them beautiful and expensive – purchased since the upturn in her fortunes – had brought an odd pleasure: For much of her life she had been the recipient of hand-me-downs, now, for the first time in her life, Becca had done the handing, taking them down to the poor quarter and it felt good. She would have given them to the household servants, but the majority of them had followed her into pants as a way of setting themselves apart as members of Aeijys Rowan's household.

Zacham, the scullery boy, his wealth of shiny black hair tousled and mixed with straw from sleeping in the stable loft, shoved a push-broom with a handle that was longer than he was tall through the common room past Becca. The tables and chairs stood stacked in the corners to allow this daily cleaning. One of the adults would come through later with a mop, which Zacham was not yet strong enough to manage. The Cock and Boar, the cleanest establishment near the wharves, attracted as many traders and mid-level merchants as they did sailors, which had not always been the case; it had only been since Aeijys Rowan and Tagalong Smith purchased it that the Cock and Boar stopped being a cheap dive and became a first rate tavern. And, since last spring, when Aeijys lured away the Duke of Beltria's best pastry chef, it had begun to get the occasional wealthy merchant and guild master with a sweet

tooth.

Becca nodded at Zacham, appraising his efforts and finding them adequate. He flashed her a grin, then ducked his head in the self-conscious way some children had simply because he did not know what else to do. She had just started toward the kitchens, the Cock and Boar would be opening for breakfast soon and the regulars would be pounding on the doors if she did not get them open on time, when a flash of blue light erupted in front of her, stopping her in her tracks.

"What in Nine Hells!" Her hand dropped to her pocket where the ends of a sling dangled above a handful of smooth stones. She wore a dagger at her waist and, although she had had some recent training, her instinctual reaction was still to reach for her sling. It was the only weapon she had known since childhood and felt entirely comfortable with. She always had a pocketful of her lucky river stones.

The blue light faded, leaving two people huddling in the middle of the floor in front of her: a man cradling a bloody, grievously wounded nude man in his arms. Becca was already moving before the man's face registered in her mind and she recognized Josh's deeply seamed, weatherworn face and abraded complexion framed by a heavy, gray-streaked, brown beard. Becca went to her knees beside him, searching his face for clues to what had happened and who the man was.

"Help her," Josh said, his voice strained with weeping. "Please, Becca."

"Of course." The tavern master brushed back the long tangle of sweat-drenched, blood-crusting hair from the man's battered face and a scream rose in her throat before she could stop it. "Oh My Gods! Aejys!"

Zacham dropped the broom with a clatter, racing to her side. The scullery boy crouched at her elbow, staring through the crook of her arm. "Ohhhhh."

Becca glanced at Zacham and bent forward, trying to block his view of Aejys by covering their liege-lord with her body and elbowed the boy back. "Get away, Zacham. You don't need to see this."

The kitchen staff poured into the common room, clustering about them. An irritating cacophony of shocked questions rose around Becca. "Get out, all of you!" Becca shouted before she thought, then recovered enough to start issuing orders, "Zacham, Molly, wait. And Ash. The rest of you get back to work. Zacham, roust Omer and Raim. I'll need them to help get her upstairs. Ash get the healer fast. Molly, fetch a sheet and a blanket. We'll wrap her in the sheet first so no fibers from the blanket get in her wounds."

As she straightened, a soft sob just behind Becca's shoulder, caused the tavern master to swivel on her knees. A small girl of seven stood there – obviously frightened – worried tears running down her round cheeks.

"She'll be all right, Sami," Becca said, not really certain of anything. "Get hold of yourself. Go sit out front and tell the regulars we'll be opening a bit late, to be patient. But don't tell them why. This is very important. Don't tell them why. Just say 'opening late' nothing more. Can you do it?"

The little girl wiped her tears away with the back of a grubby hand, nodding.

"Good." Giving them things to do would keep down their talk and brooding on what they had just seen.

As they departed, Becca turned to Josh. "What happened? Where are the others?"

"Rowanslea," Josh said, adding quickly. "They're okay." The sot reeked of whiskey, a nasty sour smell: He had consumed so much that it was sweating through his pores.

"That's something," Becca muttered. "Who did this? How did it happen?"

"Margren."

"Her sister?"

Josh nodded. "Talk later, Becca. I don't feel so good." Strain from the incredible jump and reaction had set in; he felt dizzy and sick.

Becca caught Josh as the sot collapsed, lowering him gently to the common room floor to lie beside Aejys. She checked him for wounds and, finding none, wrote his unconsciousness off to the alcohol. Molly reappeared and together they carefully wrapped Aejys in the sheet to protect her wounds and then the blanket to keep her warm.

Molly was a small middle-aged woman who wore her golden, curly hair caught at the back of her head with a bit of cheap red ribbon. She had warm brown eyes thickly lashed. Her small, delicate mouth was twisted tight with worry and concern. A soldier's widow, she had spent years following her husband on campaigns, serving as nurse, cook, and general forager for the company. When her husband died, the commander felt that it was improper for her to continue with them, took up a collection from the men, and sent her away. It was the blood, gore, and ugliness she had seen during those years of endless marching that caused her to say what Becca was afraid to, "She's been tortured. Get someone to build up the fire in her rooms. I'll need some warm water and soft cloths. The least we can do before the healer gets here is to start bathing some of the blood off so he can see what is hurt and what isn't."

Becca felt grateful to be able to put Molly in charge. Although the tavern-master had seen her share of brawls, she had never seen anything as ugly and upsetting as this.

\* \* \* \*

The healer lowered Aeijys' wrist, shaking his head. "Massive blood loss. Someone revived her..." He gently pulled the pillow from under Aeijys' head, moving it to beneath her feet and added the pillow from the far side also. He wore deep green robes and trousers; his waist length, glossy black hair tied back with a simple bit of green leather; a broad woven green band around his neck concealed his gills in an attempt to obscure his mixed species parentage – unnecessary for a member of Aeijys' tolerant household, but Taun was new, having been enlisted by Becca after Aeijys' departure from Vorgensburg last summer.

Oil-lamps sat on the nightstand, a small table in the center and the two end-tables framing the window seat, their wicks turned all the way up, sending a dancing orange glare through the room in response to the tiny draft entering along the edges of the windows.

Becca shook her head. "What does that mean, Taun?"

"She died." Taun's pale sea-foam eyes hooded with distress, for the thought clearly bothered him. "They brought her back. Sometimes, if a healer gets there in time, they can restart the heart and breathing."

"But she'll be all right?"

"I can't say yet – her blood-pressure is almost too low to..." Taun broke off, changing the subject – he had looked eagerly forward to finally meeting Aeijystrys Rowan, but not like this. This was the worst thing the young healer had ever seen. "That's lifemage work." Taun's finger lightly traced the scars on Aeijys' stomach. "Those wounds are only about an hour old."

Becca blanched, folding her arms across her stomach and fighting back nausea at the thought of what had been done to her liege lord. Before Aeijys Rowan pulled her out of the gutter side of life, she had been a tavern wench, serving drinks and turning tricks just to survive. Aeijys recognized and rewarded her talents, showing her that there was a better way to live, even arranging for Becca to learn to read and write. *And if Aeijys is lost, then the whole household is in danger. Everything we've gained is lost*, she thought, then flushed with shame: *I should be worrying about Aeijys, just that, not what will happen to myself and the rest of us. No. Aeijys would want me to worry about them.*

Taun turned to Josh. "Why did they not finish the healing? Why only a makeshift mending?"

"They're dead." Josh dropped his eyes, focusing with distressed intensity on his fingers drawing circles on the clawed arms of his chair. He wore a long nightshirt with a wool blanket wrapped around him, his well-shaped legs sticking out beneath. He had roused from his exhaustion and alcoholic stupor the moment Omer and

Raim tried to slide him into bed, managing to stagger down the hall to Aeijys' room where he curled up in an over-stuffed chair. Josh had collapsed mainly from reaction to the strain of making the long Jump to safety in Vorgensburg from Rowanslea.

Taun's eyes went distant, unfocussed. "Genocide," he said softly. "I've heard rumors that the lifemages were all slain by the sa'necari." Then he visibly shook himself free. "Keep her warm. Keep her feet up to reduce the strain on her heart. Should she wake don't let her out of bed for any reason. Find some kind of bowl for her to relieve herself in. Get all the liquids into her you can. Lots of broth and tea." He pulled three bottles from his satchel. "Three fingers of this three times a day. It's a blood tonic." He sat a large bottle of amber liquid on the nightstand, placing a bottle of golden holadil next to it. "Two fingers for pain and to keep down the chance of infection. As needed. But at least three times a day for now."

"What's that for?" Becca picked up the smallest bottle, which contained a blue powder.

"With her blood pressure so low there's a chance of seizures. Should it happen, rub the powder into her nostrils and gums."

"That would mean we're losing her..." Becca guessed this.

Taun's expression clouded again. "If we can't stop them quickly enough..." He pulled the blankets over Aeijys, tucking them in around her. "If it happens, get me immediately. I need to get some splints made for her hands and fingers. I doubt she'll ever have much – if any – use of them again – but we must try. And don't leave her alone. Not for a moment!" He shouldered his medicine satchel, rising to his feet.

"Taun," Becca's hand on his arm stopped him. "Would you mind moving into the main building here? I want you right next door to her."

"Can Skree stay here with me?"

"Of course. Skree is always welcome."

"Thank you." Taun's face brightened. His lover was a skeptic, harboring grim suspicions about all landsmyn; so Taun saw this as an opportunity to turn him around. Even more importantly, Skree was a sea-mage with gifts and knowledge more wide ranging than Taun's: if Skree could be persuaded to help, then Aeijys' chances of survival would be vastly improved. However, only a lifemage could make a real difference and neither of them were one.

"I'll send Omer and Raim for your stuff."

\* \* \* \*

Becca could hear the kitchen crew banging pots as they washed up from the evening meal in the room beneath her office; the day had crawled away at last and yet she had gotten very little done, running as she had with her spirits at half-mast. It had taken all the strength and discipline she could muster just to keep the worry schooled out of her face and voice for the sake of all who depended on her and who ultimately depended on Aejs. Last time there had been a serious crisis Tagalong and Clemmerick had been there to back her up, this was the first time that it was all up to her. There had been several rich influential merchants hovering about like vultures ever since Aejs left for Rowanslea last summer, held back only by the knowledge that Aejs and her crew would be returning in the spring. If Aejs did not make it, they would descend on the properties to rip it and everyone there into bite size pieces before eating them alive. It would happen fast, because they would want to get it done before Tagalong Smith could return. Most of Aejs' people were social outcasts, pariahs, rogues and rebels, people who rarely got a first chance, much less a second; as a result they were fiercely devoted to her. Many influential people, Thomas Cedarbird being the ringleader, would like to see them put back in their places, shoved down into the gutters and ghettos from which Aejs had rescued them. Without Tagalong Smith and Clemmerick Poetson things could get very, very bad indeed.

With all that weighing on her mind, she sat at her big desk, staring at the open ledger book distractedly without really seeing it. She was still new enough to reading that she had to think about the words in front of her, and she could not find the concentration just then. Next to the ledger was a slender book of children's poems that Brother Arlethan had left her as a primer. Her life had been both easier and harder back when the only person she had to worry about was herself. "Well, rise with the waves or sink to the bottom," she muttered resolutely.

The finish on the enormous monstrosity of an oak desk had long ago been worn away in all but a few places; the edges were nicked and battered. It had dozens of drawers with unmatched pulls on them. She could have had a new one; Aejs had suggested it often enough, but the otherwise unsentimental tavern master and seneschal would not hear of it. She had wanted this odd desk for her own from the day she first saw it when she worked for the previous owner. To have *this* desk was a cherished symbol of how far she had come since that first day in Vorgensburg ten years ago. She had had to sleep with the old bastard just to get the meager job serving and whoring in the Cock and Boar; now she not only had his job, she had his desk.

She had slept alone for over two years now, despite frequent temptations, and that would have felt just as good as the desk, except that she had finally found someone she genuinely wanted a relationship with. Unfortunately the big ogre did not seem at all interested in her except as a friend, and she had let it go at that out of fear of endangering what they did have. Now that Clemmerick was far away in the Rowanslea Mar'ajanate of Shaurone, she could not stop thinking about him, imagining and wishing she had done something about the situation before he left with

Aejys. What made it even worse was that their last encounter had been a bad one. She had beaten him with a broom stick and chased him out of the tavern after discovering he and Josh had managed to consume most of the north cellar in a single night of uncharacteristic, for Clemmerick, drunkenness.

She missed him in more ways than just his company. He had taken care of the stables (she had to hire two myn to get anywhere near as much work done as Clemmerick had alone) and he had helped her with the books. Becca knew she had to start delegating some of the work around the properties since there was getting to be too much of it. Maybe she could have Brother Arlethan, the Willodarian cleric who taught reading to all in the household who wanted to learn, to help her with the books – at least until Clemmerick got back.

She dipped a quill in ink and painstakingly wrote a request to Brother Arlethan to come to her office. She had to concentrate hard just to form the letters readably and wondered for a moment at the end of each word, hoping she had spelled them right. Then she sighed and blew on the ink to dry it: if she had not spelled them correctly, she had at least gotten close enough that the good monk would be able to figure them out. Becca folded the note, walked to the door, and shouted into the hallway, "Zacham!"

It did not take long for his tousled head to appear, sticking out of a door with the end of his broom just above his head. She waved the note at him.

Zacham disappeared, and then reappeared without his broom. She gave him the note. "Take this to brother Arlethan," she told him.

"Okay," he said, grinning brightly, grateful to be off broom duty for a time. He took it and raced for the back stairs, which were closer to the converted warehouse serving as winter quarters.

Becca returned to her desk, sitting a little longer, staring at the pile of tally sticks before closing the ledger book with a sigh, finding it too hard to concentrate with Aejys lying upstairs in bad shape. Worrying about Aejys; worrying about Clemmerick; wishing Tagalong Smith, Aejys' partner and Becca's friendly nemesis, was there to back her up on various deals involving their holdings – but even more importantly to keep Cedarbird off her back. She needed to see how the renovations were going on the two adjacent warehouses that were being converted into winter quarters for their drivers and caravan guards, but what she really wanted was to be sitting upstairs with Aejys, making certain she was all right. Watching over her liege-lord would not make Aejys get better faster, but it would comfort Becca just to be there. So she headed upstairs.

\* \* \* \*

Zacham found Brother Arlethan in the little office he had in the warehouse. The withered old monk engendered mixed feelings in the boy. Most of the time it was all

right, but some times he scared Zacham and the boy was never certain why; it was just a gut-feeling so he never brought it up to the adults, who would probably brush it off as a childish worry. Zacham hovered in the door with the note in his hands. Arlethan was alone, his nearly baldhead with just a thin fringe of hair around the base glinted redly in the lamplight. He stretched his claw-like, gnarled fingers toward Zacham and a chill ran down the boy's spine.

"You have something for me?"

Zacham nodded. "Note from Becca."

"Well come here, boy. Give it to me. I'm not going to eat you."

The cleric's voice had an oily kindness that made the boy uncomfortable; left him feeling like a mouse being coaxed from its hole by a large cat. Zacham swallowed and crossed the room, holding the note at arm's length before him.

Arlethan took it and Zacham retreated. "Stop. Wait. I may want to pen a reply for you to take back."

Zacham halted, but did not offer to come closer, and he watched Arlethan read the note. When the monk finished, he nodded at the door. Zacham spun, darting out.

Arlethan rose and took his cloak down from the rack near the door. He walked down stairs to the narrow alley that ran between the warehouse and the Cock and Boar, opening on the courtyard quad. As he neared the back door, he paused. He could hear a warning hum in his ears and taste the acridness of the ward before he encountered it. The shaman's wards were back: That meant he could not enter the building – it also meant that Josiah had returned. The shaman's wards were keyed to keep Arlethan from any building that Josiah was in at the moment. He cursed softly, and then turned back. If Josiah was back, then Aejs must be also. He would have to get Becca to come to him.

"Because my old bones ache, of course," he smiled then. For nearly twenty years the Kwaklahmyn shaman, Branch, had blocked him from reaching Josiah, but eventually his Waejontori master would contact him again and perhaps he would know how to get past them. It had never mattered much before; after all, Arlethan Dinger had burned the magic out of Josiah when he was a boy, eliminating him as a threat. But there were rumors that the magic had somehow come back. Dinger's primary task, set him nearly thirty years ago, had been primarily to destroy all the lifemages of the coast and secondarily to find and destroy the entire Abelard lineage. Josiah was the last of the Abelard blood.

\* \* \* \*

Molly sat in a comfortable chair beside Aejs' bed, working on her embroidery. She normally spent her days, mopping the upper floors, making beds, dusting and other

general stuff. Molly wore black pants with a dark loose tunic brushing her knees, split fore and aft for ease of movement. Like nearly all of Aeijys' household women, she had given up her dresses in favor of pants in imitation of Becca, who had adopted the Sharani style of clothing the previous summer.

Although Josh had also remained, Becca did not count the sot as capable of watching over Aeijys and informed the servants of that. Josh spent that first day in the chair without moving from it. He dozed fitfully, stirring at every noise. Becca woke Aeijys twice to get the medicines down her, but the ha'taren, paladin of Aroana the Compassionate Defender, seemed scarcely aware of them, her eyes unfocused. The healer returned late in the afternoon to splint her hands, and, although she roused at the pain, she did not become fully conscious. Taun feared that she might never do so, being in deep shock from her injuries.

Snow blew in from the north in the early afternoon, turning to a storm by nightfall. Becca, having given up on getting anything more done with the books, relieved Molly: The servants had been taking turns sitting with Aeijys all day, rotating at roughly two-hour intervals, but Becca and Molly had taken the most shifts. Becca built up the fire some more. During the day the ovens kept the entire building heated, but in the early evening, with dinner done, the coals would be banked and it would be a matter of keeping the food warm for serving while the members of the household trooped through for their meals in the hours after closing. Then the upper floors would start to cool. She put an extra blanket over Aeijys for the night.

"Josh," she said kindly, squeezing his shoulder. "Go down and get something to eat. You need it."

Josh shook his head. "Can't. I can't leave her." Tears rushed suddenly to his eyes, running down his battered face. "Should've done more ... should've been something more I could do." *Can't think... Can't think* . Sonden told him in Rowanslea that he was the reincarnation of Josiah Abelard, the Mage-Master. If that was so, then why couldn't he think of something to pull Aeijys out of danger – he felt as helpless and impotent as he had the day he washed up on the sands near the blowholes after the archenwyrn sank his foster-father's ship, the only survivor. He hated feeling that way.

Becca looked down at him startled. Josh never had much to say to anyone. Usually he just sat and drank; wandered aimlessly along the beaches; or disappeared into one of his many mysterious bolt holes. She knew he talked to Clemmerick, for he and the big ogre hostler were friends, but he had never really opened up to any one else, especially her. Perhaps it was just that Clemmerick was thousands of leagues away, and Josh had no one to talk to... Maybe he had changed as result of things that happened on the journey. Becca could only speculate. "You want to talk about it?" Becca settled onto the window seat beside Josh's chair.

Josh nodded.

"You want a drink?" There was a well-stocked liquor cabinet in the adjoining parlor, Aeijys' private stock, but the tavern master did not think the paladin would mind under the circumstances.

Josh surprised Becca by shaking his head, "No."

"Okay."

"I – I love her..."

"We all do, Josh," Becca smiled, placing her hand over Josh's.

"No." Josh shook his head. "Not like that... I'm in love with her, Becca. For years now."

Becca went silent, taken aback by Josh's admission. Finally she asked, "Does she know?"

Josh shook his head. "I'm not worthy. I know what I am. I'm a sot."

"You just refused a drink..." Becca pointed out.

"You're missing the point. I want a drink. I want it real bad. I don't like being sober ... all the nightmares start crowding in on me. My body hurts and burns, every waking moment. I take a drink and it all goes away. I stop feeling anything."

"You just refused a drink," Becca repeated.

"Listen to me." His voice filled with a gnawing wretchedness as if life itself chewed his heart out. "I'm going to stay sober as long as I can. But it won't last. It never does."

"Josh. I think Aeijys would respect you just for trying... Maybe the healer could help."

"It's worse than that, Becca. A lot worse. I was mage-born on a small island north of here. Raiders murdered everyone but me. Sometimes in my dreams I remember crying, begging my mother to hold me, to wake up, to move, and she doesn't. She can't... because she's dead. She fell across me. Her body hid me from the raiders."

"Oh, dear gods!" Becca slid nearer to Josh until she was sitting on the edge of the window seat, leaning close to him, both his hands gripped tightly in hers. "I'm so sorry. We never knew."

Josh's face screwed up as he fought down a wave of grief, old grief, but still hot and painful because he had held it in for so many years. When he finally mastered

himself, he went on. "The mon who found me was a sailor. His ship put into the bay for water and supplies. That's who I'm talking about when I say 'my father'. When my magic started showing up it frightened him. Angered him. He meant to make a sailor out of me. When I was seven or eight – I don't know, I might have been younger – he took me to a back alley apostate priest. Had the magic burned out. It was like being blinded, half my senses cut off. And my body? My muscles started crawling under my skin, my bones hurt, my nerve endings burned. It never stopped. As I got older it just got worse."

"I'd like to beat the crap out of him!" Becca bristled.

Josh gave her a wan smile. "He's dead. The archenwurm got him. I watched him slide down its throat. I'll never understand why I lived when everyone else perished. Never."

Becca nodded mutely, encouraging him.

"When Aeijys dosed me with the holadil it restored the magic. But with the normal channels in my body seared closed, it had to make new channels. Maybe because I'd been drunk for so many years – I don't know – but the holadil bonded with the booze somehow. It's always going to be with me, but I can't use the magic without drinking – the more I drink, the stronger the magic comes out. Now I'm only mage-blind when I'm sober... To rescue Aeijys I got very, very drunk."

The tears started again, his whole body shaking with sobs. Becca stood up, wrapped her arms around him, pressed his face into her shoulder, and held him for a long time while he wept out his despair. When his sobbing stopped, Becca stepped back, lifting his chin in her hands. "Go wash your face, then go downstairs and get something to eat. You want to be in good shape when Aeijys wakes up."

Josh nodded agreement. As he passed the bed, a low moan caused him to pause. He looked back and saw that Aeijys' eyes were open, staring at him. Her lips moved with words too soft to hear. The sot rushed to her side, bending to listen.

"Josh," Aeijys said weakly, extending one ruined hand toward him. "You brought me back." Fear mixed with gratitude in her words, the weakness of her body left her emotions on the surface, stark and exposed and vulnerable in a way she had not been before. That vulnerability frightened her. She could not stop remembering: what it felt like to die; the days, which seemed like weeks, of systematic torture; the pain that never seemed to end. It terrified her and she could not get past it. She felt desperate to touch him and be touched by him; to have him chase away the terror and helplessness.

Josh moved the chair, which Becca and the servants used in watching over Aeijys, closer to the bed. He tenderly took her splinted hand in his rough, weathered ones, trying not to hurt her. He brushed his lips against the torn skin. "Rest. You'll be all right. Becca wants me to go eat. But I'll be right back. I'll sit here. Close." Then he

rose to go.

"Stay. Don't leave me..." Her weakness shamed her. She felt shattered and broken to the bottom of her heart and spirit. Josh's presence seemed to be the only thing separating her from madness, from screaming her lungs out at the hovering memories. Without him, she would feel exposed and the nightmares would fold themselves around her again like a smothering blanket.

Josh could not leave her: seeing those things written in her face affected him strongly. He hated seeing her reduced to this. He sank back into the chair.

Becca stepped into the parlor, returning with a small table that she placed beside Josh's chair. "I'll get some food sent up."

When Becca came back she found them both asleep. Josh's head lay right cheek down on the bed; arm extended, his and Aeijys' fingertips just touching.

\* \* \* \*

"My pipe. Josh, where's my pipe?"

Aeijys' voice woke him.

He stirred sluggishly, his back aching from sleeping in the chair. "Left it behind," he muttered.

Aeijys thought about that, frown lines forming on her forehead, adding to the hideousness of her battered face: Her left eye was swollen shut, a long gash stretched beneath it to her jaw; a squarish wound on her right cheek marked where her sister's ring had caught her, ripping away a chunk of flesh down to the bone; dark bruises covered her skin.

"Get me a new one," she said.

"Josh can go get it," Becca said, bending over her, relieved to see her finally awake. She originally wanted to keep Josh inside out of sight to avoid speculation about the rest of the company, especially Aeijys. However, Molly had overheard some customers talking at breakfast and reported that somehow the word had gotten out about Aeijys and Josh being back: People were asking questions. Therefore, he might as well be seen. At some point Becca intended to find out which of their people had leaked the news. Whoever it was, even if it was one of the children, would get a tongue-lashing they would never forget.

"No," Aeijys replied hoarsely, her voice rising barely above a whisper and even that enough to tire her. Without him the nightmares would close in again. "Send. Someone. Else."

"No. It isn't fair to keep him cooped up here. Josh has not left your side for two days. He needs to get some fresh air, to move around. It's not good for him to just sit here."

Aejys looked away, the small movement of her head brought enough pain to twist a groan up from her gut. She had no right to keep him tied there beside her. He had needs also. Although her stomach knotted up painfully at the thought of his absence, she forced herself to do the right thing and said: "So ... be ... it."

Becca pulled a handful of silver coins from her pocket. "Here," she said, pressing the coins into the sot's hands. "Get her a new pipe and some tobacco – an angel blend. If you see something you want for yourself, then get it. Hyacinths for the soul, you know." She had gotten the hyacinths phrase from the little book of poems she was learning to read from and liked it. Angel blends included herbs such as gahnjan, which produced a pleasant, relaxing high.

Josh's hand closed over the coins. "I ... this isn't a good idea. I need to be here. What if something happens?"

"Nonsense," Becca cut him off. "Taun will be here soon. Just go get the pipe and tobacco. And something for yourself."

Josh remained standing, looking at Becca, and hoping to change her mind, pleading with his eyes. Becca's hands on hips stance told him she would not be moved, so he sighed heavily and left. He did not have the energy to argue with her at length. Although his body was whole, his mind and spirit were exhausted.

The sot found the streets filled with people clearing away the snow, getting ready for business. Everybody stared at him, many whispering between themselves as his presence confirmed the latest spat of rumors. He felt intensely uncomfortable at first, walking along in his Kwaklahmyn style coat with a heavy wool cloak throw over for extra warmth. Several people stopped in their work to grin at Josh, telling him how glad they were to see him back in town. They always asked about Aejys, but Josh simply told them that it was not his place to say anything. By the time he started back from the tobacconist shop, Josh was feeling unburdened, his step was light and a smile flickered frequently across his face. He carried Aejys' pipe and tobacco tucked inside his jacket alongside the bag of cinnamon candy he liked best. Sucking on a piece of candy helped him not think about drinking as much.

He had awakened that morning craving a drink, his muscles crawling around just beneath his skin along with an aching emptiness in his belly for a fire that food could not quench. In spite of his best efforts, he could almost feel that hot rush through his veins and nerve-endings when the first drink would hit his system. Josh sucked viciously on the candy and walked faster. The harder he tried not to think about the whiskey, the more he thought about it. The burning spiral down into the bottle gripped him in its vortex as he struggled to shove the cravings aside, the need to hide

himself from himself. He had deliberately left his pocket flask in his room to place temptation out of reach. The people watching him no longer felt as friendly. Josh shied away from further greetings, certain that they extended them only because of his relationship to Aejs.

He was the town drunk and would never be anything more to them. They were all watching for him to fall back into the bottle again. He began to notice the undercurrent to everything around him. Vorgensburg had held him in contempt for years, knowing what he was. It still lurked there beneath the polite facades they had given him that day. A sense of desolation rose up to tighten painfully around him. All the confidence he had begun to gain while traveling in the company of Eliahu, High Mage of Winter, and the earthmage Laurelyanne, vanished. They had treated him as an equal. But this was Vorgensburg. He was home again and the only thing here was disdain and rejection. Although Aejs' household was kind to him, he sometimes found it there also, laced with pity. Josh wanted a drink.

\* \* \* \*

*Aejs hung naked in chains from scaffolding atop the highest tier of the altar of hecatomb in Dragonshead. She was dying— Margren had stabbed her repeatedly in the stomach and chest before drinking her blood and leaving. She remembered the blade: a banblade covered in death runes — Margren had made certain Aejs knew the blade's nature before shoving it in the first time — the blade ensured that she would rise, undead.*

*Her limbs felt very cold, she was afraid to look at them, to see them turning blue with undeath — she could almost feel her flesh rotting. Death she did not fear; but undeath, her soul and awareness trapped in rotting flesh, terrified her. She fought the terror, holding fast to her hope that Tagalong, her childhood companion, would come and take her head and heart so that she would not rise.*

*"Look at me!" A deep male voice demanded.*

*Aejs' eyes opened. The sa'necari, a living necromancer with all the powers of the undead, stood naked before her. "When you die with me inside you, your soul will shatter and I will have the death-gift — a piece of your soul — mortgiefan. Even if they destroy your undead body, your shattered soul will walk the earth in torment for eternity." Then he shoved his manhood inside her dying body and Aejs screamed in anguish.*

\* \* \* \*

Josh returned to the Southwest End near the wharves where the Cock and Boar lay as twilight gave way to full dark. The lamplighter, leading a small donkey, passed him with his lantern. The nearer Josh got to the tavern the faster his pleasant mood faded and he began to worry that he had taken too much time talking to people he knew in passing. The minute he entered the tavern, Josh realized something had gone terribly

wrong. Zacham sat upon the bottom stair; his face twisted and tear streaked. Josh's stomach did a queasy roll and his muscles seemed to crawl beneath his skin.

"Aejys?" Josh demanded, already knowing the answer.

The boy nodded in mute misery.

Josh took the stairs two at a time, pausing in the parlor to fling open the doors to Aejys' liquor cabinet. His glance fell instantly on a bottle of Dragonsbreath, a dwarven whiskey famous for its raw strength and intensity more than its flavor: Only dwarves drank it straight. He ripped the cork from the bottle as he spun on his heel and plunged into the bedroom, taking a long swallow. The strongest whiskey he had ever tasted, it seared his throat and stomach. His stomach heaved in rebellion, but Josh kept it down, taking another long pull from the bottle as he saw what was happening. Aejys' body jerked in rapid spasming; writhing and twisting; her chest heaved and her eyes rolled up in her head. Omer and Raim, the two big drivers fought to hold her still as the healer, Taun, tried to administer the blue powder.

Josh shoved Taun aside. "Get out of the way!"

Taun glared, grabbing at him. "Her heart's weakening. We're losing her."

Josh ignored him, roaring at Omer and Raim. "Get the hell out of my way!"

He took another long swig, sat the bottle on the nightstand. A stunning clarity gripped him as he remembered the one spell from his past life that could make a difference. The two drivers obeyed without thinking: all long time members of Aejys' household knew not to mess with Josh when he was drinking because they had all seen the strange things that tended to manifest when he did. Josh quickly straddled Aejys, his buttocks settling across her hips as he pushed her back down. Her frantic writhing intensified and for a moment it looked as if she would throw him off. His palms pressed her shoulders to the bed with the surprising strength that only came when he drank. Josh bent forward; his lips brushed Aejys' bruised lips gently.

"I love you," he said so quietly no one but himself and Aejys could hear him. He would never have said it if he believed she would comprehend his words, but she appeared to be in no state to understand.

"Get off her!" Taun shrieked, catching Josh by the shoulder. Josh ignored him, totally focusing on Aejys. Blue white light sprang up around the sot, spreading quickly to envelop Aejys as well. Taun released Josh with a startled yelp, stumbling backwards to land on his bottom. "What in Haven's Name?"

Aejys stilled as the blue-white cocoon of power embraced her with his touch. As they watched Josh's body turned transparent, fading into a ghost-like pattern of undulating energy. Josh's body sank into hers, visible only as a visual distortion surrounding and surrounding her. The convulsions ended. Her breathing and

heartbeat returned to normal. Josh's ghostly form rose out of the paladin's body, coalescing above her. Josh pushed himself away, falling and rolling onto the far side of the bed, weak and exhausted.

Taun, visibly shaken by what he had seen and filled with uncertainty about what it meant, gripped Aejys' wrist, Reading her. Her blood levels were higher than before the convulsions began – in fact they were at safe levels for the first time since the healer had seen her. Then he knew what had occurred: Josh was clearly not a lifemage and there was only a single spell that could mimic some of their powers; only a single mage in all of history had been able to work it: Josiah Abelard, the mage that created it, the only mage so incredibly powerful he had been called the mage-master. "That spell..." Taun's voice shook. "That was Shared Life... You passed your blood and life force into her body."

"Yaw," Josh said, got up and staggered over to the nightstand to snag his bottle of whiskey. He took another long pull from it. The Dragonsbreath was strong, but after those first few swallows, Josh had no trouble keeping the raw stuff down. He liked the fire it set burning in his veins, if Aejys had more of the stuff he wanted to find it. He returned to the overstuffed chair by the window seat.

"Only one man ever worked that spell successfully," the little nerien remarked, half-question, half observation. "It's creator."

"Josiah Abelard," Josh said, snuggling up to his bottle of whiskey and pulling his blanket back around himself. "Three ... he had three..." his words started to slur and he worked hard to speak carefully so he could be understood.

"Signature spells?"

Josh nodded sloppily. "Revelation, Shared Life, an –an Shaukra Death. I ken do'em all."

"Where did you learn? What mage school?" Taun moved to the window seat, leaning close to Josh, trying to see how he could have missed the presence of such power in the sot.

"None. I'm..." Josh took another long pull from the bottle. "I'm jess uh drunken sot uf a sailor."

"But the mage-master's spell... How? How could you work that spell? His spell book was lost and without it no one could duplicate those spells."

"Anythin' Josiah did I ken do. If'n I toll you why you'd jess call me mad." A tear slipped down Josh's drunken face as much for himself as for Aejys: he was the magically and emotionally crippled reincarnation of Josiah Abelard, with all of his knowledge and none of his memories; with all of his power, but twisted and damaged in its channels. His sobriety had only lasted two days before disaster

forced him back to the bottle. Despair clamped down around his heart and soul like a demonic vise. Yet underneath that was a tiny core of relief, life felt better somehow with a haze of alcohol between him and it. He could stop thinking now, stop feeling, stop fighting.

"I think you have had more than enough of that," Taun said, trying to gently, but firmly, pry the bottle from his hands. He had had no experience with hard-core drunks before or addicts of any other variety, so he really did not know what he was getting into. He thought Josh was simply drinking to deal with his problems in a momentary lapse, that the landsmon would sober up and be back to normal soon – but Taun had not yet realized that sobriety was the anomaly for Josh, not inebriation.

Josh wrapped his arms around the bottle, hunkering down to shield it from the healer's hands. No one had tried to take his bottles away in years, not since Aeajys extended him her protection and became his guardian, but he still remembered how often he had lost one before that. "Lemme be!" he growled, glaring suspiciously at the healer. "Ish not yers. Ish mine."

"Josh, you keep drinking like this, you'll damage your body."

"Awreddy have, go way."

Taun looked stunned. "Did another reader tell you that? How many years have you been drinking like this?"

"Go way. None uf yer bishnish."

Taun tried to get hold of Josh's wrist to read the sot, but Josh balled up even tighter, thinking that Taun was still trying to take his bottle away. Taun shoved his free hand down the back of Josh's shirt, his fingers brushing close to the organs most frequently affected by prolonged alcoholism. "Holy Mothers of Life! You're dying, mon!"

Outrage surged up in the young healer, he had witnessed a miracle, but the source of it was killing himself with drink; the total unfairness and utter, to Taun's mind, stupidity of it inflamed him. Taun thought of all the people that he could have saved had he known or been able to cast the spell of Shared Life. He pulled his hand free, shoving Josh backwards. The chair overturned, spilling the two myn on the floor. Anger lent the small half-nerien strength and with a twist he managed to rip the bottle from Josh's hands, throwing it across the room. The bottle struck the wall and shattered, splattering Aeajys' bed with whiskey, filling the room with its sharp odor.

Josh burst into tears. "Ya broke it! Ya broke it!"

"What is going on?" Aeajys struggled to sit, as Josh broke free from Taun, fleeing the room.

Molly had sent for Becca, after telling her about Aejys. Becca, returning from the north cellar where she had been taking inventory, encountered Josh on the second floor landing. She reached out to stop Josh, but he shoved past her, racing down the stairs in full, heedless flight.

"Josh?" Becca called after him, then entered the suite. And asked Taun, "Aejys ... is she—"

"I'm all right," Aejys answered her question.

The sound of her voice snapped Becca's attention around. Her eyes widened in wonder and she crossed the room to reach one hand hesitatingly toward Aejys, half afraid that what she saw and heard could scarcely be true – Molly had fetched her, saying that they were losing Aejys, yet here she was sitting up.

"What in the Nine Seas is happening?" A vibrant, basso baritone demanded archly. All eyes turned to see the tall triton mage, Skree standing in the door to the bedroom. Tiny sea-green overlapping scales covered his face and body – except for his lips, the tips of his fingers and palms of his hands – reminiscent of a reptile, which he was not; his long hair green to the edge of black hung loose about his shoulders, draping the delicate lace-work of gills that ran from the back of his jaw down his long neck; suspicion was written large on his face, his half-past six foot body tensed as if ready to rescue Taun from some danger he had sensed. Neriens, like Taun, were a much smaller amphibious race than the tritons, and Skree was fiercely protective of his mate.

"Did he hurt you?" Skree demanded, drawing the much smaller Taun into his arms.

"Who?"

"The sot. Did he? When I passed him in the common room, I saw you, fighting." Skree touched two fingers to his forehead, indicating to Taun that he had had a telepathic incident with Josh in passing. Such incidents were infrequent for Skree was not a full-blown mind-speaker except among his own kind and the creatures of the sea; to catch something from a landsmon's thought was highly unusual for him.

Taun shook his head. "It was my fault. I tried to take his bottle away."

"I don't like people interfering with each other's private matters," Aejys said as Becca put a pillow to her back, helping her sit better.

Taun's face twisted up at the rebuke. "You don't understand. He worked a miracle. You're alive because he worked a miracle..." Taun's eyes glistened with angry, frustrated tears. "But if he doesn't stop drinking, he won't last three years. Maybe not even one. This is not right. It is not fair. I will not allow him to keep drinking without trying to stop him. If that gets me thrown out of your household, so be it. But I will not stop trying."

Skree glared hard at Aejs, as if daring her to do so and prove him right about the treacherousness of landsmyn.

Aejs nodded at a packet lying on the floor where it had fallen from Josh's pocket. "I think that's my pipe. Would someone help me with a smoke?" She held up her splinted hands. "I have not had one in several days. Then maybe we can talk this over more calmly." She gave Taun a lopsided grin, which was the best she could manage.

Taun returned the smile with just a touch of uncertainty. He emerged from Skree's protective arms, scooped up the package, and carried it over to Aejs.

\* \* \* \*

Josh paused just long enough in his flight to snag another bottle of whiskey from the bar before running out into the frigid weather in his shirtsleeves, muttering unhappily about the broken bottle of Dragonsbreath and wondering if Aejs might have another somewhere among her private stock. He ran recklessly across the hard-packed ground, plunging into the barn. The sot lost his balance as he reached the rows of stalls, his body twisting sharply around with a little spin that crossed his ankles and pitched him face forward into the stout stall door. Josh lay stunned, hugging the bottle. When he could pull himself together, he rose on hands and knees, crawling down the line to a big box stall at the end. It was one of the few still empty, most contained horses and mules belonging to Aejs' people currently in winter quarters. He threw himself down in the hay, wondering for a single drink-blurred instant where Aejs' big wynderjyn – a unicorn-horse hybrid – Gwyndar was, and then he remembered with a sob that Gwyndar was dead. He had been slain by the vargeis Margren sent to kill Aejs. Josh let out a long howl of grief: His drunken magic had let him talk to Gwyndar as Aejs could; he found comfort in the big animal's presence. Josh huddled deeper into the straw. He would just get drunker and drunker, pretending that Gwyndar was standing there, that they were talking. Eventually the alcohol would overcome him and all the sadness and pain would go away.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **SKIRMISHES**

Tagalong Smith strode down the main corridor in the east wing of Castle Iarwind in the Sharani Mar'ajanate of Yarrendar, the heels of her heavy boots thunking against the polished floorboards overlaying the cold stone. The stout dwarf was not usually awake in the early morning hours, but sleep had eluded her for all but the briefest handful of hours each night since losing Aejs. Grief etched deep lines in her broad, blunt-featured face. The tangled masses of her thick shoulder-length, crimson hair,

uncombed for days, flared around her face like a matted aureole. She wore the same blood-spattered tunic she had worn into battle at Dragonshead two weeks earlier in what proved a vain attempt to rescue her closest friend and partner, Aeijstrys Rowan. The usually fastidious dwarf stank of sour sweat, dirt, and blood, which she had made no effort to remove. Aeijys' death robbed her life of meaning: Only a bone-deep stubbornness kept her going when all she wanted was to curl up in a dark corner and howl with grief. Aeijys had reminded Tagalong with her dying breath of the promise that Tagalong had made to take care of her people and her children, the twins Aeijys' lover Tamlestari carried beneath her heart to be born in the spring. Tagalong intended to keep that promise and woe betide anyone or anything that got in her way. She often bragged that she was "a hard-nosed obstinate bitch and proud of it."

The Sharani were triadic, requiring three biological parents to produce a viable child: Sire, blood mother or ma'aram, and a wombmother or lasah. The embryo passed from the blood mother to the womb mother by way of the kyndi, a magical sexual energy. Centuries past, the golden banewitch queen of Waejontor had cursed the Sharani causing nearly all their male children to be miscarried or still born. They had appealed to Ishla Twice-Gendered, god of love and fertility for aid in removing the curse. But Ishla was not a remover of curses, instead she had altered their genetics, giving them a quasi third gender that could be assumed by any and all of their women, allowing one woman to bear the children for both of them which shared in the womb mother's genetic inheritance along with the blood mother and sire. The curse had ended fifteen years ago, yet that had done only a little to lift the birth and survival rate of Sharani male infants. There was, of necessity, a still burgeoning trade in male love-slaves.

Tagalong and Aeijys had been friends since childhood. For over thirty years the young dwarf had built her life around their friendship. Only a very small number of dwarves lived in Shaurone, mostly in Rowanslea, and Tagalong had been the first of them to be allowed to study at the Aroanan temple university. Except for Aeijys, none of the other students and nobles had wanted her there. She had been snubbed and harassed until Aeijys befriended her, forcing and later encouraging her acceptance as only the heir of one of the five mar'ajanates could. The lower classes fascinated Tagalong, who made frequent forays into the Poor Quarter and brought back tales of adventure to regale Aeijys with. Eventually Aeijys tailed Tagalong into the Quarter and nearly got seriously hurt by a kid gang, the Market Street Urchins, who marked her as being in the wrong part of town. Tagalong showed up and settled the score, after which Aeijys was free to come and go as she wished in the neighborhood. From that day on the friendship was sealed. But Tagalong had seen Aeijys die at Dragonshead and, not knowing that Josh's love and magic had called her back from death, was deep sunk in grief.

Tagalong's surviving troops, a scant handful of the two score from her and Aeijys' household who had set off with them the previous summer, were settling into the rooms that Geoa Odaren's seneschal, Quilla, had given them in the east wing. The

Assassins' Guild chieftain Hanadi and her Guildsmyn had parted with them in Rowanslea disappearing into the streets that first night after Aeijys' death. Aeijys had been deeply loved both by her own folk and her allies.

As Aeijys' partner, Tagalong needed to reassure their people that she would take care of everyone, too often in such uncertain times the loss of a liege lord meant danger and dire circumstances for those who had followed her. She knew also that they should hold some kind of wake for Aeijys to ease the pall of sorrow hanging over everyone's spirits; but Josh's disappearance with Aeijys' body had come as a final blow, staggering Tagalong's usually indomitable spirit, for it made one part of her promise impossible: Aeijys had died by a baneknife which meant that she would rise as undead, almost certainly a voracious revenant, endangering the very people they both wanted to protect. Tagalong had promised to take Aeijys' head and heart from her body so she would not rise, thus freeing her soul. She was not confident that Josh could or would do so and, with the arrival of the winter storm season, no messages could be sent to Vorgensburg to warn Becca who was far more tough and capable than the sot. She dreaded the possibility that she might have to hunt down and kill whatever monstrous undead creature Aeijys became.

What small comfort she did have came only from the knowledge Tamlestari Odaren Havenrain, wombdaughter of the Mar'ajan Geoa Odaren, carried Aeijys' children. The fact that the children were Aeijys' was a relatively close kept secret, although Aeijys and Tamlestari made no secret of their love. To keep the children safe from Aeijys' enemies they had let it out that Tamlestari was already pregnant before they became lovers, that the sire and blood mother had been companions of Tamlestari's slain by orcs on their journey from Shaurone to Vorgensburg to petition Aeijys to return from her self-imposed exile.

Tagalong intended to see the secret kept until she could safely bring Tamlestari and the children to Vorgensburg. She had not been able to save Aeijys, but she would protect the children with her life.

As Tagalong passed the fourth door down, the sound of voices arrested her attention, for one of them sounded very much like the voice of someone she strongly disliked – someone who had been left behind in Vorgensburg. She paused, pressing her ear to the door.

"Aeijys Rowan is dead."

"You are certain of this?"

"I saw the body. Her sister murdered her."

Tagalong snarled softly. "Cedarbird! Greedy bastard sees an opportunity here?" She eased the door open a crack, peering in. She had discovered weeks before that Briarmottë, a strapping young guardsman who enlisted with Aeijys' household for the journey to Shaurone, had been one of Cedarbird's plants, but had never suspected

him of anything more sinister than trying to steal trading agreements. He sat in a chair, staring into a broad stone from which issued Cedarbird's voice.

*Kwaklahmyn speaking stone. With Aejys dead and me here, that damned merchant can play holy hell with Becca if the kid keeps feeding him information. Shit! Shoulda searched him. But who've thought? Those stones are damned rare.* "Well, well, what have we here?" Tagalong sauntered into the room.

Briarmottë started with a small cry of alarm, shoving the stone into his pocket.

Tagalong caught his wrist, spun him around, and smashed him against the wall. She twisted his arm behind him, shoving him into the wall again with a sturdy foot to the small of his back.

Briarmottë slumped to the floor with a groan. "What did I do?"

"Ya been telling Cedarbird everthin' as if happens, haven't ya?" Tagalong Smith growled.

"No. NOOOO!" The pain in his arm worsened until he thought the sturdy dwarf would rip it from the socket. "Aejys ... just she's dead ... then you came in."

"Ya shoulda volunteered the stone when I caught ya the first time." She pulled her hammer, laying the head against the young man's cheek. "Toss the stone down now, nice an' easy."

Briarmottë fumbled in his pocket, throwing the stone onto the ground near Tagalong's feet. "I didn't mean any harm."

"I'll judge that."

Tagalong released him with another shove, sending him tumbling away from her and the stone. She spun, bringing her hammer down two handed with all the force in her tremendously muscled compact body. The stone shattered. "Fuck yerself, Cedarbird."

\* \* \* \*

A young, chocolate skinned woman, her hair a tight cap of kinky black, trotted down the hall, drawn by the sounds of Briarmottë's cries. "What happened?"

"The wee little mon has just made an ass of himself again," Tagalong snarled.

"How?" Jaqui frowned. Although she had joined the company as a favor to Hanadi, she was not a Guildsmon and had elected to stay after the others left.

"Kwaklahmyn speaking stone. Told Cedarbird Aejys' dead. That puts the asshole

merchant inna good position ta play holy hell with Becca and our people in Vorgensburg."

"You destroyed the stone?"

"Yes."

"I'll take him in hand," Jaqui said.

Briarmottë was her lover, which meant that she would probably beat the crap out of him for this newest transgression. That would suit Tagalong just fine.

"Tamlestari wants to see you. Take a bath first. She knows how Aejs died and is starting to wonder if some of that blood could be from touching her."

Tagalong's eyes hooded and her mouth tightened. Some of the blood probably was Aejs'; the paladin's body had been a bloody ruin when Tagalong held her. "I will."

\* \* \* \*

"You didn't find him?" Becca asked, sliding a tray of food onto the table in a far corner near the stairs where the young healer sat, settling in across from him. It was late afternoon and she knew he had been looking since the moment he finished talking with Aejs the day before.

Taun's squarish, blunt featured face looked tired and depressed. He shook his head dispiritedly. He had his Kwaklahmyn father's broad cheekbones and coloring, deep brown skin and long glossy black hair tied back with a simple leather thong, and his mother's sea-green nerien eyes. The thin lines in the sides of his throat looked more like scars to the casual glance, than what they actually were – the pouchy coverings of his gills. He worked hard to distance himself from his mixed species heritage so that he would be accepted simply as a healer first. Taun was not ashamed of it: but it had proven so awkward at times for his patients and clients that he simply chose to downplay it, rather than lose them to less skilled, but more racially acceptable practitioners.

Aejs harbored no racial or species prejudices, often going out of her way to hire the 'breeds' as most folk referred to them. The ha'taren – paladin of Aroana – hired only tolerant people, so her household with all its rogues, outcasts, and pariahs ran smoother than any other in Vorgensburg: the societal castoffs responded to her faith in them by giving her unswerving loyalty and steadfast, unquestioning faith. So Becca, learning of Taun's situation and nature shortly after Aejs left last summer for Shaurone to fetch her daughter home, brought him into the household and put him on retainer.

Becca sighed heavily in a mix of frustration and irritation at Josh's being back to his old habits of running away and hiding when things got awkward for him.

"Clemmerick knows all his bolt holes. But he isn't here."

She missed Clemmerick; the big ogre hostler always knew how to handle Josh. He was her right hand man and Becca depended on him heavily, but with the passes snowed in he could not start home until spring with the rest of Aejys' household. "I guess we'll just have to wait until he decides to show again."

Taun looked unhappy with that. "If he keeps drinking..."

Becca patted his hand. "I know. But there may not be anything you can do about this." She liked Taun, regretting only that he preferred his own gender sexually which meant she would never be able to satisfy her bedroom curiosity about water-breathers. "Listen. I'll tell you – Shit!"

The exclamation startled Taun, causing him to flinch thinking it was directed at him, then he followed her gaze across to the front door.

Thomas Cedarbird, his black hair meticulously braided and adorned with two eagle feathers, entered the Cock and Boar accompanied by three of the other syndics of Vorgensburg. "I want to see the tavern master," he told a serving mon who approached him. The merchant carried himself with a haughty air, the youngest son of a Kwaklahmyn chieftain and only child of his third wife, the daughter of the wealthiest merchant in Vorgensburg, Cedarbird had inherited both wealth and influence. Until Aejys captured the archenwurm's treasure by killing the monster and set up for herself, Cedarbird had – to all intents and purposes – ruled Vorgensburg. The Lion of Rowanslea had indirectly challenged him by her mere presence and reputation even before she gained a fortune that far outstripped his own. She had refused to put herself in his debt for even so much as the smallest political favors he offered her, rarely siding with him in anything. What made it worse was that for a time he was quite infatuated with her. It was when his agent Briarmottë had revealed her relationship with Tamlestari that he had finally gotten over wanting Aejys. He had now relegated her to the ranks of his rivals and enemies, and those whom he could not influence or dominate he destroyed.

Becca turned to Taun. "Stay here. I'll see what's going on." Becca strode across the common room. "What the hell do you want, Cedarbird?"

"Becca," Cedarbird said politely, but with an edge. "I think we should speak privately."

"What is this about?" Becca bristled. *One of these days I'm going to shove your slimy face in.*

"Privately..."

"Uh Uh." Becca folded her arms, taking a spread-legged, feet firmly planted, no-nonsense stance she had picked up from Tagalong. "Not until you tell me what

it's about."

*Make me call the bouncers, asshole*, she thought grimly. Her bouncers were a cohort of pixies, tough little knee-high soldiers in cloaks of invisibility. Their captain, Grymlyken, was in Shaurone; however, his lieutenant, Fezelbaum was just as capable of rallying the troops to eject the unwanted and troublesome as he was.

Cedarbird tried unsuccessfully to stare the woman down, but Becca would not be moved. Finally he said simply, "Aejystrys Rowan."

*Should have figured he would hear the rumors as swiftly as everyone else. If not sooner.* "Upstairs – follow me." She signed Taun to come with her. As the healer moved to her side, she whispered, "Get hold of Skree quick if we need him."

Taun nodded.

Cedarbird frowned at the mon, but said nothing until they were sitting in the formal meeting room at the top. He sat down at the head of the horseshoe table and that rankled Becca, for that was Aejys' chair. "I received word from Rowanslea – from an unimpeachable source – that Aejystrys is dead, but there are also rumors that she is alive ... here at the Cock and Boar." His manner suggested to Becca that he held to the former.

"She's alive." Becca scanned the faces of the three myn Cedarbird had brought along as witnesses and supporters, trying to engage their eyes and take their measure: Marya Maryasdottir, the stout master of the weaver's guild, gave her a cold stone-faced look; the syndic for the gem merchants collective had a nervous tic jumping frantically in his cheek and refused to meet her eyes; the big longshoreman's representative gave her a polite, shame-faced shrug.

Cedarbird' face remained darkly serious. "We want to see her."

"No," Taun interrupted. "She's badly hurt. I don't want her disturbed."

Cedarbird snorted. "I say you're lying. You're concealing the fact that she's dead. If she's dead without heirs, then her property belongs to the city. We will not allow you to put this off."

"Tagalong always said you were a greedy son of a bitch..." Becca growled. "She was right."

Cedarbird shrugged off the insult: He was not getting into a shouting match with a common whore who had been raised above her station. "So do we see Aejys or do we take the properties?"

"You see Aejys. If she wants to be seen," Becca snarled, "But you leave when Taun tells you or I put this in your ugly face." She raised her clenched fist to the level of

the syndic's eyes. She had always wanted to take a serious poke at the haughty merchant.

Cedarbird winced, wondering how Aejys could ever have hired the former prostitute, much less raised her to such a high level as seneschal and tavern master when she clearly had neither manners nor sense in dealing with her superiors. He had complained before about Becca, but Aejys always brushed him off with a smile and shrug. If Aejys was dead, then Cedarbird intended to smash the infuriating whore back down into the gutter where she belonged – hard – along with the rest of the riff-raff Aejys had collected. There would be nothing left when that detestable Tagalong Smith returned in the spring.

"She'll see us or we will be back with the city guard to impound the properties."

"Wait here."

Taun threw her a glance, pleading not to be left alone with them, but Becca shook her head. Cedarbird frightened him. He sent a silent plea through his mind-link with Skree, calling the triton to his aid. The nerien was better at sending, than receiving, except when he was touching the person, so he did not know if Skree heard him or not.

\* \* \* \*

Aejys and Molly were alone in the bedroom when Becca stalked in, eyes blazing. "We got trouble," she said.

Aejys levered herself up on her elbows and Molly put aside her embroidery to shove pillows behind her. Aejys suppressed a groan at the pain in her back and stomach. Her back had been cut to ribbons of dangling flesh by the lash and stomach torn open by a blade. The slain lifemages had mended enough of the stomach wounds to save her life, but healing came slow. Even the smallest movement or pressure against her back hurt. "What is it?"

"Cedarbird. Says you're dead and wants the properties."

"Wondered when he would show his colors. Any idea where he got this notion?"

"It wasn't our people."

"Send him in." Aejys hated letting any outsiders see how badly off she was, but there seemed no other choice.

\* \* \* \*

Becca found Skree sitting beside Taun. There must have been an exchange of harsh words as Cedarbird's tame guildmasters and syndics looked uncomfortable. She

gave Taun a quick glance of approval, and then signed the others to follow. She led the way into Aeijys' bedroom with Taun and Skree close beside her and Cedarbird at her heels, the others in tow.

Molly looked up from her embroidery, throwing a defiant glare in response to the disapproving gaze of the outsiders at seeing yet another female in pants. Becca dismissed Molly with a wave. Then she saw Josh sitting in the chair by the bed. He had not been there when she came in a few minutes ago. She was uncertain whether his presence was a good thing or a bad thing, but Taun seemed cheered to see him.

Aeijys reclined against the pillows piled behind her. Josh sat beside her, striking a lucifer to light the pipe she gripped between her teeth. She shifted the pipe to the side of her mouth to talk around it. "So, Cedarbird," she smiled unpleasantly, her expression made still more distasteful by the swelling, cuts and bruises; her storm grey eyes hard. "What trouble are you making for me and mine today? I would rise to greet you, but as you can see I had a difficult time in Rowanslea."

"Aeijys!" He stared in complete, incredulous startlement. "I – I... How did you get here? Bri – I was told you were dead."

"My mage," Aeijys replied, her face expressionless, her tone tight with an undercurrent of threat. "I would say the rumor of my death is a trifle premature – or are all your sources as inaccurate as Briarmottë?"

Cedarbird started at the name.

"Tag and I figured him out the first week."

Cedarbird had always been a small thorn in her side, ever since he began to suspect that she was indeed Aeijys's Rowan, the Lion of Rowanslea, and not just a down on her luck soldier who had managed to capture a great wrym's treasure: He had tried to entice her into Vorgen politics as his ally as well as various other ways to put her in his debt, but Aeijys had always refused to be drawn into his plots, plans, and schemes, political or otherwise. Tagalong had never trusted him, predicting that he would become serious trouble when he saw she could not be bought. Tagalong had just been proven right.

Cedarbird seemed to squirm for a moment, and then pulled himself together. "He is my amanuensis' nephew, nothing more. He is not in my employ and never has been. I don't know what you are talking about."

"That's not what he told me when Tagalong caught him trying to undercut her trading agreements along the way. He filled two pack animals with samples he bought."

"He lied."

"I seriously doubt that. But that's not the issue here. You threatened to take everything if I died or was already dead without heirs. I'm solving that here and now. Until such time as I produce heirs of my body, I'm declaring Becca my heir. I'm formally adopting her."

Becca stared at Aejys, her eyes gone round as saucers. Everyone in the room stared at Aejys. The declaration was too much for Cedarbird who exploded.

"You can't do this! She's a whore! Half the city's been between her legs. You have done insane things before, Aejystrys Rowan, especially since you gained your fortune. But this will not hold up. No one in Vorgensburg will ever accept this filthy gutter slut as your legitimate heir!"

Becca went instantly from astonishment to white-faced shaking anger. She started toward Cedarbird, but Taun grabbed her, holding on tightly as he pressed his mouth to her ear, murmuring, "No. No. No. Let Aejys handle this."

Becca glared and subsided.

"Watch. Your. Mouth," Skree told him.

"It will hold up. There are many ways to see that one's will is enforced after death. I learned that at my mother's court. Furthermore, my allies in other realms would take more than a passing interest in seeing my will carried out. Shaurone could use a seaport."

Cedarbird shook his head uncertainly. "But you said you were not..."

"Ohhhh, you were right all along," Aejys said, her words laced with sarcasm and anger dancing in her eyes, daring him to try anything. "*I am* the Lion of Rowanslea. I have more resources than you can even dream of. The threats you made to Becca have made me very unhappy with you."

Josh turned his red-rimmed drunken eyes to Cedarbird and, with a small gesture, filled his hands with blue fire extending them toward the merchant. Cedarbird backed away, shaking his head as if the former sailor had just sprouted a second set of arms.

"I don't like you calling Becca bad names," Josh said. "She's my friend." The sot stood, moving closer Cedarbird. "People who play with fire get burnt."

Skree gave a slight grin and filled his own hands with bright green light, extending them also toward Cedarbird, making a fine game of it.

Aejys started to laugh at the expression on Cedarbird's face, but choked it off at the pain in her chest and back; Josh had pulled her out of danger, but she was still far from healed. Just then she simply wanted to give Cedarbird a taste of her power;

with Tagalong and Clemmerick in Rowanslea, as well as part of her household guard, it was imperative to make Cedarbird understand that she was still a power to be reckoned with. "Cedarbird, I'm telling you to back off. If you don't, I'll break you like so much kindling. Josh. Toss him ... out."

Josh grinned. A wave of his hand sent the flame coruscating over the syndic. Cedarbird screamed, more from fright than discomfort, as the flames did not burn him, then he vanished. The other syndics gasped in alarm. Josh shook his head, his words slurring a bit, "Put'em in tha snow out front."

Aejys sucked in a series of deep breaths, pushing past her pain. "Live and let live." Her eyes narrowed as she met the steady gaze of the stout matron from the weaver's guild, Marya Maryasdottir. "Till now Vorgensburg has been good to me."

"You've been good to Vorgensburg," Marya answered. "But you are the only person in this city wealthier and possibly more powerful than Cedarbird. He could crush the rest of us easily."

Aejys gave a thin, small smile as much as her swollen face would allow. "I am a soldier, Marya. I never liked court politics, though I've played it with the best. Talk to your people. Any who would swear fealty to me before their god and mine, will be under my protection. Normally, I respect neutrality, but if Cedarbird turns this into a war, military or trade, I will crush him and all who traffic with him. I have a lot less patience now than I did last summer."

"And what will this cost us?"

"We can discuss it later," Aejys grimaced at the increasing pain, she was beginning to feel nauseous from it, a little dizzy and very tired. "I need to rest."

Marya and her companions started for the door.

"Just be certain that every one knows the bottom line: set yourselves against me and I will crush you along with Cedarbird."

As the door closed behind the syndics, Aejys lay back against the pillows giving in at last to the weakness of her body: her complexion had gone pale and her breathing ragged, her heart raced from the effort of fighting back the pain to present a determined face and stay far more alert to them than she actually had strength for.

Taun gently pushed past Josh to take Aejys' wrist in his hands, Reading her deeply. He laid her wrist down with a heavy sigh, turning to pour four fingers of holadil in a glass, twice what he normally recommended. He lifted it to her lips, helping her to drink.

"Josh," she said as the elixir hit her system and a warm languor slid over her, "I want you sober. Talk to Taun. I don't want to lose you."

\* \* \* \*

Tagalong sent servants for hot water and waited for them in the bathing-room of her chambers. Once in the tub, heat eased her body and soothed her spirits, pulling her from brooding. For a little while she was able to block the memories of seeing Aejs die. Aejs' battered body – it haunted her dreams and her waking moments. She had still been alive when Tagalong reached her, lifting the cloak they had wrapped her in before anyone could stop her. The enormity of the wounds and bruises Margren had inflicted on Aejs, knowing what terrible pain she died in as Tagalong watched – it was almost more than the stalwart dwarf could handle. If she could find some way to pay Margren and Mephistis back in kind, then she would. Once she got Tamlestari to Vorgensburg, it would be time to look for some serious payback.

A hand extended over the tub and poured a fragrant oil into the water: Jasmine. As the scent filled the room, Tagalong sighed. "That's nice."

"Yes. It's one of my favorites."

Tagalong turned and saw Tamlestari kneeling beside the tub, her body rounded and swollen with the children she carried. "Stari!"

"I was tired of waiting." she smiled, but it could not erase the sadness in her slanted green eyes.

"You wanted to talk?"

"About Aejs."

"I promised her I'd take care'a ya. I will."

"Including taking me back to Vorgensburg? I don't want to be left here."

"Yeah. Soon as the passes open. Take a different route though. Back through Vallimrah, then drop down ta th' trade routes and over. Ya better have a midwife along. I don't know nuthin' about birthin' babies."

"Laurelyanne does."

"Huh! Yer makin' plans behind my back?" She gave the young prince a ferocious mock glare.

"Well ... yes. I had to be certain I had an alternate way of getting there if you said no."

"Why'n Nine Hells, would I say no? There're Aejs' babies. They belong'n Vorgensburg. Not this shit-assed realm."

Tamlestari smiled again and this time it almost reached her eyes. "They are all of her I have left." She closed her eyes and pressed her hands to her stomach.

"Kick'n?"

"Yes. They're lively."

"Should be."

"Tell me about it – about Dragonshead."

Tagalong's face clouded. "Ya don't wanta hear this."

"I do. I need to hear it from you."

Tagalong remembered and the memories hurt. She started slowly, telling how they had ridden hard for Dragonshead after Mephistis took Aejs. The fight had been hard once they got into the citadel. Then they broke into a chamber of hecatomb where a hundred deaths could be taken in a single rite. They found Kaethreyn, Josh, Clemmerick, Eliahu, and Sonden already there along with a small guard of ha'taren and bradae. A single death pole stood at the top. They were kneeling around something and the instant Tagalong saw that she knew it had to be Aejs. She did not know who had cut her down from the pole and did not ask; just as she did not ask who had bound her on it and stuck the blade in, that much, at least, she knew in her heart was done by Margren. She described the rest in far less detail, wanting to spare Tamlestari at least that much: how she flicked back the cloak they had covered her with to see the bloody ruin of her body. Aejs' dying breath had been given to remind Tagalong of her promise to protect her people and Tamlestari. Then she died. Sonden said she was not quite dead yet, but Tagalong knew different: she had just seen Aejs die. She was crying when she finished. So was Tamlestari.

Tagalong climbed out of the tub and wrapped her wet arms around the half-Sharani, Valdren prince, holding her, their faces pressed together as they wept. "Nuthin's gonna happen ta yer or tha babes. I swear ta GimliGloikynen. An' yer comin' home with me."

\* \* \* \*

To Becca's profound surprise, the next day Aejs sent for a solicitor of the court and made good on her threat to Cedarbird: She had Becca declared her heir should she die without issue. They sat together in Aejs' room with a small pot of tea on the little table. Aejs had settled against the pillows on the bed, her legs drawn up and crossed, giving her more purchase and easing some of the feelings of helplessness she was prone to when she laid flat.

"I simply cannot believe you did that," Becca told her.

"With Tag stuck in Shaurone until late spring at the earliest, more likely late summer, I had to make certain our people would be safe if anything happened to me. Cedarbird brought that home – the hard way."

"I still cannot believe it."

Aejys grinned with a twist of her old mischief and said, "Why? Can't bring yourself to call me 'Mother'?"

"Ohhhhhhh!" Becca groaned, then shot her a mock glare, "If there were any place on your body that wasn't already cut or bruised I'd smack you."

Aejys chuckled. "Oh there is, there is. But that would be incest."

Becca groaned again.

"Seriously, now. There's something you should know. It doesn't leave this room."

"What?" Becca sobered.

"Tamlestari is carrying my children. The reader said twins, a boy and a girl."

Becca looked dumbfounded. It took her a moment to recover, and then she quipped, "What? You mean I'm not stuck in this situation? Thank the Nine Gods!" Then she sobered again. "Babies? Brendorn's?"

"Yes."

Becca fairly glowed and stood up, reaching for Aejys before remembering she could not hug her without causing her pain. "That's wonderful."

"It does not leave this room. I don't want assassins going after them. If they must go after anyone, I'd prefer it was me."

A darkness flashed across her face with a sudden sear of memory – what it felt like to die – and she reached for that core of stubbornness and anger that was all she had left to sustain her. She let go of the breath she did not even realize she had been holding and it passed.

Becca caught the small fleeting change that swept across Aejys' face and was gone. It troubled her. She had been catching small nuances in Aejys' face, manner, and tone of voice for days now: there was more broken than her body. She wished desperately that she could fix it, but had no idea how or even if it could be fixed. "I'd rather it wasn't either of you. But I understand."

\* \* \* \*

Aejys lay in the darkness, staring at the ceiling; her expression haunted. Light glowed from the adjacent parlor and she could see Molly through the open door working on her ever-present embroidery. They did not need to sit with her, Taun had said as much. Josh had pulled her out of immediate danger. However she could not reach or pull on the bell rope with her splinted hands if she needed something so there was always someone in the parlor or sitting next to her bed. Her mind ran round and round with desperate, troubled thoughts like a small, frightened creature lost in a maze.

*What did I do to deserve this? What did I not do that could have prevented it? Was there anything I could have done? Or not done? My daughter, my halaefs, and many old friends are dead and somehow it's my fault. I should have found a way around that vow – I should simply have violated it and taken the consequences. Better me than them. I've been wounded, beaten and killed ... only to be brought back in this broken body... What purpose is served in that? Nothing. I can't even find the strength to pray.*

*But prayers would probably go unanswered anyway. Aroana does not hear those whose souls are tainted with the promise of undeath, whether or not it was taken willingly. My God forgive me. The taint is there, I know it. I cannot feel it or sense it. But it must be there. Those lifemages who Josh told Taun about barely mended those gut wounds, they could not have had enough strength to take the taint from me or they would have healed more of my body.*

Aejys turned her head into the pillow to press the tears of shame and terror from her face. She watched Molly embroidering again, her fingers moving deftly. The sight made Aejys ache to use her hands. Taun had been honest with her, telling her frankly that she would probably never have full, if any, use of her hands again. But at least she still had hands; he had not had to remove them. She had been freed of that crippling vow, but now she was crippled in other ways. Her freedom had come too late. Of what use was a crippled ha'taren? Especially against the tremendous powers and forces her sister and her sa'necari lover could field.

"What is the use?" She screamed before she could stop herself.

Molly quickly laid her things aside and came in. She put her hand comfortingly on Aejys' unwounded shoulder. "It's all right," she murmured as she would to a frightened child. She had seen the terror and shame in the faces and voices of others who had survived such tortures before during the years she had accompanied her dead husband's units. "You're safe."

"I am not safe! We. Are. Not. Safe," Aejys replied bitterly. She waved her splinted hands. "And I cannot do a damned thing about it!"

Molly poured two fingers of holadil and slid one hand behind Aejys to help her up enough to take the drink. "You need to rest. To sleep. You won't feel this way in the

morning. Its just night-terrors."

"Can't sleep. Nightmares..."

"I know. Drink this for me, please?"

Aejys looked up at the concern in Molly's face and acquiesced.

\* \* \* \*

"I want to help them," Taun said, lying in Skree's arms in the afterglow of love play, on a large curtained four-poster bed beneath a sea-foam green canopy.

"You want me to Read her?"

Taun snuggled deeper into Skree's arms. "Both of them. I want you to Read both of them."

"She interests me. But the sot? He tried to hurt you. I want nothing to do with him. Except feed him to the sharks."

Taun winced, remembering the five sailors that had assaulted him one night walking the wharves: Skree had summoned an orca and fed the landsmyn to it one at a time. He turned to look up into his lover's face. "But he did not mean to." The half-nerien touched Skree's temple, initiating rapport, letting him see what had actually happened.

Skree's lips twisted in a wry smile. "That's not like you, little seal."

Taun's expression turned embarrassed. "Something is happening that I don't understand. I am not a mage, Skree."

Skree's face went suddenly cold and expressionless. He pushed away, rising and going to the shuttered window, his hand pausing on the latch as if to open it. Although he preferred to be warm, cold did not bother him as much as it did the land creatures: he had swum the arctic waters as a youth, learning to summon the orca, seal, and walrus. Even the great white shark hesitated to attack a triton, especially one who smelled of magic.

"When you two fought over the bottle... I smelled evil. Landsmages cannot smell auras and power the way my people do. I thought it was the sot. Until now." He pivoted sharply, staring hard at Taun. "We have never lied to each other, Taun. It is one of the things I adore about you – you tell me the truth even when it hurts. I value that. Until just now, when you showed me what happened, I fully intended to kill the sot. He likes to walk the beaches. I watched him all last summer. It would be very easy to pull him under. Keep him there until his lungs burst."

A tingle of fear raised the hairs on Taun's neck and made the fleshy pouches of his gills itch. "Josh is not evil. He meant me no harm." Taun knew well how easily Skree killed; he was after all a child of the unforgiving seas. "What did you smell?"

Skree hissed savagely. "*Sa'necari*. Mortgiefan was taken that night and her room stank of it. You know the law. Nerindalori has commanded: all sa'necari must die."

Taun could see rage building in the huge triton's eyes. "Neither of them are sa'necari. I've touched them both. I would know."

"Maybe. Maybe not, little seal. At some point I will read them. But understand. If either of them is dirty, I will kill them and go back to the sea."

\* \* \* \*

Cedarbird walked the streets on the southeast side of Vorgensburg, past rows of derelict houses and the winter-killed remains of abandoned gardens. That area had been hit once too often by the raiders out of Brunstrat. The people who had once lived there had either been taken as slaves, killed, or simply given up trying to defend themselves in the days before Aejys' household had taken a hand in guarding the waterfront. The whole city hailed her as a hero because of it, but no one had had the courage to move into this quarter again. That was why Dinger lived out here.

The house looked abandoned, the door hanging half off its hinges, ragged curtains waved from broken windows. Candles sat on the remains of a low table in the front room. Cedarbird struck a lucifer, lit one, and then walked to the door beneath the stairs at the end of the room and from there into the pantry just off the kitchen. He stamped on the floor three times, and then backed off. A trapdoor opened in the floor and a rogue in black leather emerged with a lantern. He held it aloft while Cedarbird descended, and then followed him down.

"The master is with his pets," the young mon said.

Cedarbird nodded. It was warmer down here. If it got too cold it would endanger Dinger's pets and the apostate priest had put too much effort into their cultivation to risk them. Cedarbird smelled magic as he followed the mon through two dusty rooms into a third.

Sixteen large glass tanks lined the walls, filled with sand, rock and a bit of naked branches. Dense wire mesh covered the tops weighted down with a stone. When he got close, he could see the hibernating serpents pressed against the glass in places. It fascinated him. He would never have had the courage to handle or work with these creatures, as Dinger did. Those that he recognized were among the most venomous on the northwest coast. Dinger stood by the last tank with one in his hands, stroking its head and murmuring words in a language that Cedarbird did not recognize. His fingers glowed with power and his touch left little lines of magic along the serpent that seeped into its skin. Dinger was enhancing his pets again.

"I need to talk to you," Cedarbird told him.

"A moment. I am nearly finished." Dinger returned the serpent to the tank, settled the mesh lid over it, and weighted it down with a rock.

"This must be important, Master Cedarbird. You rarely come to me here."

"It is." Then Cedarbird described what had occurred at the Cock and Boar earlier.

Dinger was thoughtful. *So Josiah has somehow found his powers again. How interesting. I thought when I burned them out of him as a child they would never be able to return.* "And what is it you wish me to do about this?"

"I want her dead," Cedarbird told Dinger. "The two mages and that infuriating whore also."

"That will take time," Dinger told him. "My resources are not what they once were. Aeijys' allies wiped out most of my network last summer."

"But you can still do it? There are others I could hire..."

Dinger did not miss the threat and it irritated him. He knew there was no one else in the Vorgensburg who could even begin to challenge the fallen paladin: ha'taren were hard to kill, almost as hard as sa'necari, and her resources were good, even with half her key people in Shaurone. Aeijys had a gift for finding and developing talent from places no one else even thought to look – it served her well. But even that had its limits and would eventually fail her. "Yes, of course," he said smoothly. "It will take me a few weeks to set up."

"It needs to be done soon. Before she recovers enough to be a threat and especially before her partner can return in the spring."

"I understand, Master Cedarbird. And it will be accomplished. But I will require two – no three times the usual price. This will be an expensive undertaking."

"So be it," Cedarbird pulled a pouch from beneath his jacket and handed it to Dinger. "If that is not enough, send someone to me with your requirements."

## CHAPTER THREE

### ISRANON

The surviving sa'necari, who had managed to escape from the fall of their citadel beneath Dragonshead with their wounded prince, emerged at the edge of a narrow ravine north-northeast of Castle Rowan. The freshet running down the center of the

ravine spread into pools and a broadening stream there. A thicket of tamarack and hemlock concealed them from any who might be abroad in the valley below. The sa'necari, necromancers with all the appetites, powers, and needs of the undead bound up in their living bodies, gathered loosely around their prince whom they had borne on a litter to this place. They had fed him blood from their own wrists to heal his wound, which otherwise would have killed him. Their knee-length, black robes swirled in the wintry breeze. Dawn stained the snow as red as the blood they drank, a good omen to them. They wore their loose pants stuffed into boots. Only one of them did not dress as the others: Isranon, who was least among them, and wore brown as a sign that he did not follow their ways.

Prince Mephistis rolled onto his side and drew his feet under him in an effort to sit. Instantly Isranon started toward his prince to help him, but Mephistis waved the youth off. Then he began ordering them into pairs to make their way to the occupied zone of Waejontor. From there, they could reach the sliver of mountains still held by their people. Ten years past the Sharani had overrun their homeland in a bitter war.

*One day they would reclaim their lands and punish the insolent Sharani.* Mephistis thought long concerning Isranon. He dared not send him alone through these dangerous lands. The Sharani burned captured sa'necari alive; and yet, sending him with the wrong one was just as dangerous, for his own people were just as apt to kill him and eat him. They had come close to it at Sowayn. Mephistis would have gone with Isranon himself, but he needed to wait for his beloved Margren, and he needed time to heal. Too many in one place was just as dangerous; too many lingering close to Dragonshead would draw unwanted attention.

"Troyes," Mephistis said, calling one of the middle ranks to him. "I want you to ride with Isranon as far as the farm of Claw Redhand. Then I want you to continue on to my brother King Baaltrystan and carry word of what has happened here."

"Alone?" Troyes' sounded speculative, eyeing Isranon.

"Alone. Leave Isranon with Claw. If something happens to him, whether it is your fault or not, you'll be belly down. Understood?" Mephistis snarled. *Belly down and taken in the rite of mortgiefan that shattered souls.*

Troyes nodded. "Yes, my prince."

Isranon looked uneasy, but said nothing. Mephistis appreciated that. Isranon was his only true friend and never questioned him. The prince wanted the youth safe. Nevin, the lycan lawgiver, was the youth's *sguurmondru*, which meant loosely godfather, but was more precisely translated as Teacher of the Ways. Nevin would keep him safe.

\* \* \* \*

Isranon and Troyes walked north through the thickening snow along a hunter's

trace, skirting a small village east of Rowan City. He watched Troyes cautiously and surreptitiously from the corners of his eyes. Troyes made him edgy just by being there. Last autumn on his birthday, which came on Sowayn, Margren had declared an orgy in Mephistis' absence. As part of the entertainment, the sa'necari had forced Isranon to run a gauntlet across the great hall as the price of rescuing the little nibari – specially bred, genetically-altered, human cattle – named Rose, with whom he had fallen in love. They nearly killed him before Mephistis, who had returned early from his journey, disrupted it. In the confusion some of them escaped with Rose and rited her in mortgiefan. Isranon could not say what part in that Troyes might have played, but his suspicions were enough to make him leery of his companion.

Mephistis' threat had evidently sobered Troyes enough that the large sa'necari said little to Isranon that first day, which suited him fine. He considered fleeing Troyes at some point, but that would have been a statement of his vulnerability, an invitation to Troyes to take his chances and eat him. So Isranon would not do that, unless forced. He wore a brace of long blades at tied to his hips and thighs, and a longsword at his back. He tied his thick, curly, black hair at the nape of his neck. They needed to find less conspicuous clothing and horses. They were conspicuous enough being two males traveling alone in a realm where three out of four were female.

The hunter's trace ended at a back road and they turned up it, keeping to the trees along the sides. Should they hear someone approaching, they could easily slip out of sight.

The hunger for blood would come in time. It did not come as often as the hunger for food, although some sa'necari fed at every opportunity simply because they enjoyed it. Some fed on blood alone, by preference. Most sa'necari were still made, not born; although in the older lineages, like his own, where the rites had gone on so long over the generations that the genes had altered, the need for blood arrived with puberty as well as the means for taking it.

Isranon could go for days without craving it, but eventually it would become a painful, aching necessity that would twist in his guts like the blade of a knife. His body felt healthiest when he took a bit each evening, like sex. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, blood and sex. A comfortable routine. That was how it had been with Rose. She had never denied him her blood or her body. His throat and chest tightened at the thought of her. Tears pressed his eyes, but he refused to let them out. It was not safe to show weakness and he had not yet allowed himself to fully mourn for her. He shook himself out of his thoughts as he noticed Troyes walking up to a house on the roadside. It was the first building he had seen in hours.

The wood slat house had a narrow rail porch. Troyes stepped onto the porch, peered in a window through a crack in the curtains, and smiled. Barrels lined the side of the house and a long barn ran out behind them. Troyes shook the snow from his cloak as he knocked on the door. Isranon hung back, knowing what was coming. He

saw the stout farmer come to the door. Troyes raised his hand and took her mind. Then he entered.

Isranon came up on the porch, sat down on a chair, and watched the snow falling. He felt miserable. The occupants' terror ripped through him. His stomach tightened and soured. Isranon pressed his arms against his stomach. It was harder to take the terror of others, the pain of others, than it was his own. He would rather be beaten himself than to watch others beaten. Then he felt a soul shatter. Mortgiefan. Troyes was taking mortgiefan. Isranon snapped his shields up, closing it all out as tightly as he could, retreating into the silences as he had been taught as a child.

*"I hate you. I hate all of your kind..."My kind. My kind... I am a monster. What use is it to fight them? It is their nature, like the lions of the forest. No. No, it does not have to be my way.*

He was never certain how time could disappear, but darkness came. Troyes emerged, standing in the door with blood around his mouth and a contemptuous turn to his sensual lips. "Aren't you going to come in and eat?"

Isranon lifted his head from his knees and uncurled, not remembering exactly when he had drawn so deeply into himself. "Are they all dead?"

"Yes, half-a-mon, they are all dead."

Isranon released a long breath. "Then I will come in and eat."

Troyes stepped back inside, allowing Isranon to walk past him. The first room was awash in blood. Troyes had played here. There had been no struggle. He had taken them all easily with his power, snaring their minds with a touch and a glance before they realized what he was. Three adults, all women.

The Sharani had few males. Although the curse that prevented nearly all births of males among them had ended nearly fifteen years ago, it had done little to increase the numbers of males. Only one in four were born male. One woman hung from a door by her leg, her throat slit, her blood draining into a basin. Another lay staked in the middle of the floor – that was the mortgiefan he had sensed – raped and cut to ribbons. The third was tossed across the couch half eaten. Isranon went to the kitchen, found a cup, and dipped blood from the basin, drinking it thirstily. He felt dirty, but the blood tasted wonderful; it soothed him. He saw stairs leading up. There had to be more ugliness up there and part of him did not want to see it; but part of him felt drawn to it. He climbed the stairs and found the children's rooms. Troyes had raped the children before he killed them – but at least there had been no mortgiefan; he had not taken their souls.

"If there is a god that listens to misbegotten creatures like myself, give me a way to stop this." Then he shook himself, folding his hands behind his neck, bowing his head in resignation. The only god who listened to the sa'necari born was the Hellgod,

Bellocar, and Isranon refused to either worship or propitiate that one.

The words had become a litany, one that he often repeated in varying forms and degrees. "Sa'necari do this because it is their nature, like the beasts of the field. There is no way I can stop it. It is a fact of existence. At least it does not have to be my existence."

*It will be better when I reach Claw's farm.* Isranon had probably spent more years there, hiding, than he had fleeing the sa'necari with his father and the rest of the Dark Brothers of the Light. They were all dead now. The sa'necari had murdered them all as heretics. Isranon was the last.

He went through the adults' wardrobes, the Sharani were large, and found clothing, tunic and pants that fit him. In Shaurone the sexes dressed closely alike except for festivals when the women liked to show their males off, by putting them in fancy robes and kilts. Then he went down again to the front room. He put together packs of supplies from their cabinets and a pair of bedrolls, which he carried out to the barns where he had glimpsed horses.

"We might as well sleep inside," Troyes said, following him out.

"I'll sleep in the barn." The thought of sleeping with the bodies chilled Isranon.

"Then maybe I'll sleep in the barn." Troyes brushed Isranon's cheek. "Do you play nibble games, Isranon?" He flashed his fangs, which were still extended.

Troyes had asked him that before. But that had been within the precincts of Mephistis' hidden citadel at Dragonshead. There, Isranon had had Mephistis and the vampire, Dane Jayce, to back up his refusals to couple with and yield his blood to the stronger sa'necari. Now he had no one and nothing, save his stubborn pride.

"No." Isranon knew that if Troyes pushed the issue it was a fight that he would lose; he was overmatched from the start by Troyes. By never having crossed the line and taken a life in the rites, his powers were little more than a child's. He knew the spells of death magic and could use them, but his powers were weak. He relied on his blades, strength and speed; but a mere swordsmon had no chance against a sa'necari of Troyes' ability – even one who had been trained by the lycans as Isranon had been.

"I've heard you like pain." Troyes' hand tightened on Isranon's arm.

Isranon jerked free. He was of average height, but already becoming very broad through the shoulders and chest. He would be powerfully built when he finished filling out.

"You've heard wrong." Isranon backed away, drawing his sword and filling his other hand with power. If Troyes wanted a taste of him, he would have to fight for it.

He did not fully realize the import of what he had instinctually done; but Troyes gave him an odd look, his head cocked, and withdrew cautiously.

"I know your kind. Never knew a sa'necari could do it."

"Just back off and leave me alone." Isranon went into the barn, curling up in the straw. He had barely settled before he came instantly to his hands and knees. His stomach seized and heaved. Had he eaten the food would be spewing back up, but blood was always absorbed by the body as swiftly as it entered. Dry heaves wracking him for several minutes, leaving him feeling weak and sick. He had been terrified and disgusted by Troyes.

Voices whispered around him. *"He thinks you're a battlemage, Dark Brother."*

Isranon opened his eyes and saw the ghosts of two of the farmers, their children crowding around them. The third farmer, who had been shattered in mortgiefan, was missing. The familiar sick chill wrapped through him with feelings of guilt and powerlessness.

Ghosts did not speak to sa'necari, and in this Isranon differed from the others. He had been seeing ghosts all his life. Normally these thin, shifting phantasms hated the sa'necari and the keen distaste was mutual, for ghosts were the only undead the sa'necari could neither mimic nor master.

"What is a battlemage?"

*"You have been kept in ignorance. By yourself as much as by them."*

"But I have been around others of my kind at Mephistis' court for four years!"

*"They sense your difference and do not speak. And when they do speak, you build a castle around your mind and do not hear. We, newly dead, speak not just for ourselves, but also for all. We are the voice of many."*

Isranon bowed his head at the ghost's words. "My sister and I hid with the lycans and our nibari until Mephistis found us. With the Dark Brothers and our fathers, we did not speak of anything outside our survival. And we got that by fleeing into the silence. What is it you want?"

*We are sent here to warn you. Learn or die. Once there were three brothers. The vampire, the sa'necari, and the Dawnhand, speaker to spirits.*

"Learn what?" Isranon cried out helplessly. "Learn what?" But the ghosts were gone. He knew the old text they referred to, but not why they brought it up now. It did not change anything.

*"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."*

*Did they mean that, like his ancestor, his time to die had arrived? Would it be like Dawnhand's death? Impaled on a stake.*

Isranon's sphincters tightened at the thought of a large, greased shaft entering him, forcing its way deeper and deeper until its steel point broke through the muscle at his shoulder. It had taken Dawnhand a full day to die in terrible agony.

\* \* \* \*

They rode as the crow flew, angling straight to the frozen Arris River. Isranon knew he could never have found his way here with the skill and certainty that Troyes did. The sa'necari spoke little to Isranon, watching him covertly from the corners of his eyes. Isranon gave Troyes no sign that he had caught those small glances. Troyes had shared out the bottles at the farm, after he filled them, with Isranon. So the youth had his own supply in the golden preserving bottles that kept blood as fresh as it came from living veins. He would not have to ask Troyes for any when the need came hard upon him four days later.

Isranon saw that Troyes chose to take no food and clearly intended to live off the blood alone or feed again on the living. They crossed the Arris at dusk, entering the edge of the Aluin Mar'ajanate by way of the iced over fords made easily passable by a thick crust of snow that gave their mounts purchase over the ground. Troyes made camp in the ironwoods at the foot of the southern spur of the Iradrim Mountains above the village of Farennd on the third day since escaping Dragonshead.

Troyes built a small fire, settling back against his saddle as a pillow, a preserving bottle in his hand, drinking the blood as if it were wine, rolling it around in his mouth to savor the taste before swallowing. "Why did your father give you a traitor's name?"

Isranon ate cheese, not yet craving the blood enough to drink it. He was determined to let it become a roar in his body before he drank. He ignored Troyes, the words of the teachings running through his minds:

*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.*

"You did not answer me," Troyes prodded, setting his bottle aside.

Isranon shrugged, building a castle in his mind, retreating into the silences. "I never asked."

"You should ask him."

"He's dead. They burned him."

Troyes nodded and, when he said nothing more, Isranon knew that the sa'necari had assumed the ones who did it had been Sharani. Isranon's mouth tightened as he built that silent castle in his mind against the memory of the sa'necari burning his father and the others – those that they had not taken in mortgiefan. Only he and his sister had escaped. Shortly after that Mephistis found them and became their protector.

"Shall I take first watch, Troyes?"

"No, get some rest."

\* \* \* \*

Isranon carried his flute in a case that hung on a string around his neck. It was the only surviving relic of his ancestor, the Dawnhand, and he treasured it. The ache to play it worsened day by day as they rode northwest. The music had often been his only comfort, since the craving for blood first came upon him at ten. He remembered Margren's mate, the minstrel, Juldrid, who used to sit and play with him on the bluffs of Dragonshead. His hands stroked the case, but he did not take it out, lest he anger Troyes unnecessarily. He had learned long ago that the music of a flute irritated sa'necari. They disparaged it usually; some even said they found it foul; but others, those most steeped in death – even his beloved prince – winced from the sound, finding it painful because the music of a flute was the sound of life. No other source of music troubled them.

They had entered the thick woodlands of the Danae Mar'ajanate on the tenth day of riding and followed the foothills along the mountains until the Iradrims merged with the higher peaks of the Eiralyskali range. There they descended into the rugged canyons and twisted valleys that looked like an impossible giant had ripped his fingers through the soil. They traveled mostly by night, cautiously eluding the patrols as they rode deeper into the occupied zone.

They reached the town of Hell's Widow three weeks later. Hell's Widow had once been prosperous – if anything Waejontori could be said to have been prosperous when the upper classes had a reputation for cannibalism. The Regent of Danae controlled this sector, and she had a lighter hand than the Saer'ajan. The Waejontori women of the lower classes dressed in unrelieved black, mid-calf smocks that

brushed the tops of their boots, their faces framed in heavy scarves, walking with eyes downcast as befitted their sex – or so custom decreed. This stood in marked contrast to their Sharani overlords, who strode among them with their arrogant manners, like males in their pride.

Isranon wished that Troyes had not chosen to ride openly into the town. He felt exposed, vulnerable, as if the Sharani could simply look at them and smell sa'necari. Troyes looked over all the signs on the inns and taverns. Isranon could tell that he was looking for something. Finally, Troyes must have found what he sought, because they turned in at the yard of one near the outskirts at the far side. A boy started to take their horses and Troyes shook his head, asking to see the stable master. When the man came, Troyes whispered something to him that Isranon could not hear, and then passed him gold and a small object. Isranon understood: this was a waystation.

"No dark rites, half-a-mon," Troyes whispered with a sly sneer and then laughed at the joke. "But there will be fresh blood and *a full meal* for me."

A boy led them into the inn through a back door.

Isranon's expression tightened, his lips thinning, his eyes narrowing to slits as his shields slid into place. It would be another night of ghosts most likely; for what Troyes meant by "full meal" was that he would be eating a human, draining him to death – expensive fare, but Troyes was a noble's eldest son who probably had more than enough gold to pay for it.

The ghosts came more frequently of late. Isranon wanted to feed and sleep. That was all he wanted. *Please! Please let there be no ghosts tonight!*

"Shall we dine together, Isranon?" Troyes asked.

"No."

"Why not, half-a-mon? Are you that afraid of death?" Troyes asked, his tone sliding sensually along Isranon's awareness, taunting. "Dine with me." He ran his finger down Isranon's cheek.

Anger flared suddenly in Isranon. "The only way I would dine with you would be to dine on you." The dagger leaped from its sheath, coming up to rest at the hollow of Troyes' throat before the sa'necari would react. "Don't touch me again."

"You intrigue me, Isranon. You have become an endless source of speculation ever since the Prince found you and your sister. Pity about that one. Was she mad, half-a-mon who will not step into the dark? Did she really burn herself? Or did you burn her?" His nostrils flared and his head lowered until his chin nearly touched his chest, that tiny sneer smile playing about the edges of his mouth, his voice low, almost a rough rumbling purr deep in his throat.

Isranon neither moved nor answered, holding the blade steady at Troyes' throat, waiting as if he were made of stone, yet calm and still and his muscles loose, ready to move.

"Masters? Is there a problem? Your rooms and meals are ready." The boy had returned to the little parlor. He glanced from face to face, but his eyes kept returning to the blade.

Isranon stepped back, returning the dagger to its place at his hip with a quick flick of his wrist. "I will be dining alone in my rooms."

"As you wish," the boy said. "Nibari only. A male and a female, light meat. Plus a full dinner for three." It was clear from his tone that he thought it odd, that a sa'necari would want to feed the nibari as well as feed on them.

Isranon smiled at him. "I'm keeping them all night. A party. I'm a very strange sa'necari." He reached into his pouch and pulled out three silver pieces, putting them in the boy's hand, and then he flashed a fourth piece and added it to the rest. "That's for you."

The boy whistled. "Whatever you need, lord, I'm Rutili. At your service!"

Isranon followed Rutili to his rooms, turning his heel sharply to show his disdain of Troyes. He had deliberately asked for one of each; he wanted Troyes to understand that it was not his masculinity he objected to but the mon, the creature himself.

\* \* \* \*

"What are they like?" Isranon sat on the couch in the generous room that had no windows. The male still slept, but the female had awakened and curled next to him. Her head rested on his shoulder with her neck turned to the proper angle to expose the favored vein, showing that she had been well trained. The nibari, the human cattle of the sa'necari, were compliant creatures.

"Who lord?"

"The Sharani." Isranon thought of Margren's sister, Aejys Rowan, remembering the paladin's face as they dragged her to the Chamber of Hecatomb to rite her. Despite having been tortured, even knowing that she was about to die, the paladin had had a kind of quiet defiance, almost serenity, which bespoke her complete faith in her liege-god. It had moved Isranon. He knew almost nothing about the Gods of Light beyond a handful of names. He hungered for that kind of faith. But no God of Light would ever want him, nor would the nethergod, Hadjys. His kind belonged to the Hellgod, Bellocar, whether they wish it or not. Bellocar's servants had created the sa'necari.

"But surely you know. You've just come up from Shaurone as I hear it."

Isranon shook his head. "I mean the ones who have not been touched by the darkness. The only person who had not been touched by it in all of Dragonshead was Juldrid and she was from Norendel, not Shaurone. What are they like?"

The nibari shook her head. "I wouldn't know. We're not allowed to speak to them. They segregate us. Don't want them knowing we exist. Where do you go from here?"

"It's better that you not know." Isranon sighed, realizing he should not have mentioned Dragonshead either. He hated what he was about to do, but would be as gentle as he could. So he kissed her, filled her thoughts with the dreams of flowers in spring, and swept away the conversation, trying hard not to damage anything else as he did so. She fainted. "Forgive me."

\* \* \* \*

In the morning they moved on again. Isranon wished he dared to have gone out into the markets and seen what the Sharani were like. Isolation ate at him. To have a world out there and be afraid to touch it lest the Sharani discern the monster within the mon. Living among monsters had begun to take a toll upon his heart and soul, like a sustained drought slowly withering a once healthy sapling. He had felt it more keenly on this long, lonely ride with just this single monster at his side than when he had more concerns to occupy his mind. That would change once they reached Claw's farm, but for the moment it was a maddening roar. He tried to stay focused on their destination and not give into his emotions.

Half a day's ride further they crossed a sturdy covered bridge over a deep cataract and were no sooner on the other side than seven gigantic wolves burst from the thick underbrush to confront them. A tall craggy faced man with a long scar that ran from his forehead across a twice broken nose and split his upper lip, made by a kenda'ryl knife – one of the few metals that could scar a lycan – stepped out before them. He saw Isranon and nodded, then turned to Troyes without so much as a greeting.

"These are the rules," he said in a harsh, raspy voice. "There are no full meals to be found on Clan Red Wolf lands. From the Eirlys River," he pointed at the cataract, and then indicated the direction of the rest of the landmarks, "to the piled boulders and six pines, north to the caves and south to the broad meadows and place of fallen trees. You ask permission before feeding; otherwise you are our guest and take your meals with the rest of us so long as you guest at our chieftain's house. The other homes and farms on clan land you enter only if invited. You hunt game only if invited. What you do beyond our borders is your affair, but you are warned not to bring your troubles here. If the Sharani should pursue you to our borders we will kill you. We are law-abiding citizens of the occupied zone. These are the rules."

Isranon dismounted, walking up to the scarred lycan. "Nevin!"

Nevin relaxed, threw an arm around Isranon's shoulder, and started off with him, leaving Troyes to follow with the others. "And how have you been, Isranon? Merissa has missed you. And so has everyone else."

All the tension and stress melted out of Isranon. He had come home.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A TASTE FOR DEATH

Mephistis Waejonan, youngest prince of Waejontor, had taken refuge in a mountainous area thick with caves and tunnels a day's ride from Dragonshead. A week before he had crept into Geoa Odaren's camp by night with four of his sa'necari and stolen Aejs from beneath their noses. The paladin had been in an alcohol-fogged sleep after learning that he had murdered her daughter and na'halaef – mate – Ladonys. *Easyprey*. He gave Aejs to his beloved Margren, her sister. He would always savor the joy and exultation he had seen in Margren's face that day when he returned with Aejs. Margren tortured her for days before opening her stomach with a blade and leaving her to die in a rite of mortgiefan.

Somehow, Aejs' people knew about their citadel at Dragonshead and came after them. The assault had been led by Tagalong Smith and an unknown Shardith, bond-mate to a great shadow hound. They would never have found the secret entrance to the underground citadel if not for the hound and a treacherous tribe of catkin who had pretended loyalty to him and then betrayed him. He should have expected as much, for although he had not known about the Shardith, he had been aware that some catkin tribes served a yuwenghau – a young rogue god – Dynarien, twin brother to Dynanna, God of cussedness. His only comfort lay in the knowledge that Aejs' Rowan was dead.

The cave where he waited for his companion, Bodramet, to rendezvous with him was small, dark, and stank of the dry muskiness of animals that had once laired there. It had two natural chambers with a narrow waist between them. Mephistis crouched before a small fire, shoving twigs into it, staring into the flames climbing the meager fuel. The fire could not warm him; he could not build it large enough, for fear the smoke would be seen. The chill worsened the pain of his wound. He had taken as much blood as he dared from his surviving acolytes to heal himself, before ordering them to scatter in pairs and make their way to the last remnant of free Waejontor. It would take much more blood to complete the healing for Kaethreyn's, Aejs' blood mother's sword thrust had torn his internal organs and intestines. Had he not been sa'necari, the living embodiment of the undead, with willing blood available, it would have killed him. Kaethreyn materialized on the altar of hecatomb just as he had been taking mortgiefan on Aejs' dying body, his seed ready to explode inside her at the moment of death. The act would have shattered her soul

and he would have absorbed part of it, thus enhancing his magical energies.

His beloved Margren, who shared his taste for death, had not been at Dragonshead when it fell and been left behind. Mephistis tried several times to contact her mind to mind through their link. When she did not answer, he knew she had been slain. So he sent Bodramet, his companion, to try and recover her body before someone could take her head and heart. So long as her body remained whole, it would rise undead and return to him. For a time Mephistis prayed in silence to the Hellgod, Bellocar, for Margren and Bodramet's safe return.

He found himself thinking also of Isranon, praying that the Sharani had not caught him. While he loved Margren, he trusted the youth far more. Isranon, with his Dark Brothers sense of honor, devotion, and duty, was not like the other sa'necari: his loyalty did not depend upon Mephistis' strength and patronage to ensure it. *And yes* , Mephistis admitted, *I love him also* .

Mephistis would never forget seeing the somewhat scrawny boy, who had not yet begun to fulfill the promise of his broad shoulders, break from cover in front of him in full flight from a pack of hunting sa'necari. Mephistis had mistaken him for a lycan, since they were on the edge of Claw's valley. He snatched him up with a hand to his collar and a spell, thrown him across his saddle, and stopped the hunters with a slash of dark power. But when his hand had brushed the fourteen-year-old's cheek, Mephistis had recognized Isranon as sa'necari.

"Be safe, Isranon. Be safe."

Finally he rose, pulling his cloak tighter around him, and moved to the cave entrance to stare at the sun rising through the treetops. "A day," he muttered, his darkly sensual, almost feminine face twisted in worry. "It's been a full day... Where are they?"

He hungered, but dared not go out after a victim until Bodramet returned: the Sharani were hunting him. They knew what he was, maybe even who he was, so the hunters would be paladins, priests and mages strong enough to have a chance of taking him in open battle. He remembered the exquisite taste of Aejys' dying body as he pushed into her, moving in rhythm to the struggling beats of her failing heart. So close. He had been so close to taking mortgiefan, to shattering her soul and drinking it in. His member rose in response to the memory, deepening his hunger. His nerve endings burned and his muscles ached for the taste of her.

A flash of color among the trees jerked him from his reverie. He retreated a short way into the outer cave, watching. A single figure on horseback, something large and blanket-wrapped tied before him: Bodramet had returned with Margren's body.

Mephistis emerged, seizing Bodramet as he dismounted and embracing him. "You found her."

"Indeed, lord," Bodramet answered. "She and the others were cut down in the great hall as they celebrated her victory. Kaethreyn is dead. The lineage of Rowan is ended."

Sadness swept through Mephistis, remembering the last time he saw her alive. She had been happy and afire with passion, telling him to come to her bed later wrapped in Aeijys' blood so she could lick it off him. He had been eager to do so. But that nameless mage had somehow opened a gate directly onto the altar, ending all their dreams and plans. There had been too many unknown variables in his equations; variables he had never dreamed existed. Where in Hell's name could Aeijystrys Rowan have found a mage with such terrible power, Mephistis had never imagined that anyone like that could have existed without his knowledge, his spies were everywhere, even in Charas, the city of magic itself. With the Rowans decimated, only the Asharen and Danae bloodlines remained to threaten Waejonan's lineage and he would find a way to destroy them also. Then his people would retake their lands and strike out across the world. But what of this mage? With Rowan gone, would this mage come after him?

Together they took Margren's body down. Mephistis knelt in the snow, unwrapping her face. Her skin was blue, her eyes still staring in that last moment of shock as the blade went in. Mephistis kissed her lips, her face as if to take away the pain he saw there.

"They will pay."

Then he lifted her in his arms, carrying her to the inner cave. Bodramet lingered behind, taking two stuffed saddlebags from the horse. Throwing them over his shoulders and leading the animal, he followed.

\* \* \* \*

Mephistis laid her body in the small inner chamber, unwrapping her completely. He found a single wound where a skilled thrust had put the blade directly into her heart. Her death had been quick. That comforted him. He felt the torn fabric, stiff with her blood, then ran his fingers along the lips of the wound. When she woke the wound would still be there, but with several feedings it would close, the color would return to her skin as stolen blood awakened her heart and she would pass for living. She would be able to do anything the living could, except reproduce: her body would never again give life.

That turned his thoughts to Juldrid and the children she carried. He and Margren had deliberately raped and terrorized Juldrid after shoving their children inside her. One of his surviving acolytes reported seeing Juldrid fall beneath a hail of Valdren arrows. He had not been able to find her mind. His link to her had always been tenuous at best, because she fought it fiercely. So far as he could tell Juldrid and his children were dead. He would make more children... but they would not be

Margren's.

"Fetching her may not have been wise, My Lord," Bodramet said, pulling an object from his pocket and dropping it on Margren's body. "She died by her own blade... She'll rise as a revenant."

Mephistis gasped as he saw the broken empty hilt of the Blade of Nine Souls. "I can control her..." Mephistis said. "She'll come to herself in time with several feedings." Having died by her own baneblade, all the power from the souls she had stolen had been released. She would still be strong, but not as she had been and that grieved him. He had made her powerful, been mentor as well as lover to her. He would pay them ... oh yes, he would pay them for this.

"If she doesn't kill us both first."

"Get out. Leave us alone," Mephistis snarled.

"As you wish," Bodramet gave a curt vow, set a pair of the saddlebags down, leaning them against Margren, and withdrew to the outer chamber.

\* \* \* \*

Mephistis kissed her cold blue lips and they yielded slightly to his touch: rigor was passing. He shoved his hand deep into her wound, closing his eyes, searching her corpse with all his necromantic senses. The first stirrings of undeath, the reawakening of the muscles, moved through Margren's body, while her captive soul in its prison of chill flesh slept, dreaming of blood and freedom. Mephistis pulled his hand out, drew his dagger, cutting his arm. He let his blood flow into Margren's wound, then wiped his arm across her lips, smearing her face, speaking the first rite of binding, making her his again. This would weaken him further, slow the healing of the wound in his side, but he would feed before the day was out. Mephistis cut her tunic open enough to reveal her nipples, dark against the blue skin. He cupped her torn left breast, fondling her nipple with his thumb. He could feel the undeath stronger now.

His lips closed on her nipple, sucking and biting lightly, tenderly. Tears started from his eyes, dripping onto the corpse. "Margren ... Margren."

He cut the lacings of her trousers; fumbling as he tried to push them down, then simply cut the crotch open. He fingered the lips of her vagina, moving his fingers until they were deep inside her, manipulating the cold flesh as if it lived and he could give her pleasure. Mephistis grew hard caressing her and opened his trousers, lifting himself out. Her chill, clammy flesh closed about him as he entered her. He wept with his face pressed between the mounds of her breasts as his rhythmic thrusts moved deeper and deeper within her, desperately seeking a response that could not come.

When he had spilled his seed, he lay for a time atop her. Then he noticed the saddlebags. He opened them, finding several golden preserving bottles, all full. He unstopped one, raised it to his lips, and drank. The bottle's magic had kept the blood as warm and fresh as if it were newly come from living veins. He drank it all. His wound no longer ached. He opened a second one and a third. The wound closed. His powers rose, renewed to fullness. His fear of the Sharani searching for them faded to nothing. One on one, there existed only a single mage who could seriously challenge him: the nameless mon who had opened the gate into Dragonshead.

\* \* \* \*

Mephistis stepped into the outer chamber so softly the younger sa'necari did not hear him and watched Bodramet unstopper a bottle, taking a long swallow from the thick crimson fluid. His eyes closed, intense bliss suffusing his face like a long deprived alcoholic who finds a bottle of two hundred proof. Bodramet wiped the back of his hand across his mouth to catch the remnants, then licked his hand before taking another long pull. From the look on his face, it had to be exceptionally potent blood.

"What is that?" Mephistis asked.

Bodramet grinned broadly. "The paladin's blood."

"Aejystrys Rowan?"

"Yeah."

"Give it to me!"

Bodramet glared for a moment, his eyes locking with Mephistis'. His power rose and was slammed back with a force that sent him reeling against the wall. Once before Mephistis had been forced to teach this one obedience: Bodramet had been standing at the head of the gauntlet, bending over Isranon's still and bloody body. Mephistis had reacted with unthinking rage, believing the youth slain, and battered Bodramet severely.

As powerful as Bodramet was, Mephistis was more so – 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 Aejs 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 heritage 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, ride him into death, and assume the throne of Waejontor. Should the one who carried the legacy of Waejonan ever perish by the arts of the lifemages – releasing all the fragments of souls and stolen magics – then Waejontor would perish also.

Mephistis took the bottle from Bodramet, drinking from it, feeling the heady power of the blood, remembering again the intensity of shoving himself inside Aejs' dying body. Before she could die and yield to him mortgiefan, Aejs' ma'aram, bloodmother, had shoved him off the dying paladin, grievously wounding him with a sword thrust lengthwise through his sides. The hunger for her remained, gnawing at the pit of his stomach. He had never been robbed of mortgiefan in mid-rite before and his frustrated need was ravenous beyond anything he had felt in his life. He had heard this need described by others who had experienced it, but never expected to own it himself. Some sa'necari were said to have died of reaction following mortgiefan theft. It would take many lesser death-gifts just to take the edge off his need, but he dared not venture so soon into areas where he could take one strong enough to ease or sate him.

He had tasted Aejs: Only Aejs or another as strong could satisfy the need burning in his cells and nerves. He took another long drink: the bottle was now half empty. "I must feed again before we leave. I must have a death."

"My Lord?"

Mephistis paused, throwing him first a shrewd glance and then the bottle. Generosity was the hallmark of a good leader. He had honed it to perfection: he would beat his supporters, his lovers, and even his friends into submission one moment, and then surprise them with gifts the next. It kept them off guard, never knowing what to expect from him. "Kill it. I will bring back a child for you."

Bodramet smiled happily. "Good hunting, lord."

\* \* \* \*

Mephistis returned in the late afternoon, riding a proud cut gelding and leading three

more horses. Three bound, blanket wrapped captives draped the backs of two horses and, as he had promised, one of them was a child. The third horse was packed heavily with stolen supplies. He had ridden openly, trusting the snow to fill in his tracks. The prince no longer wore his elaborate robes, clad instead in black woolen knee-length tunic and trousers just like thousands of Sharani. He threw back his cloak as he dismounted, turning to drag the first captive from the horses.

"This one is mine. The others are for you."

"My lord is generous," Bodramet replied, dragging the child and the male adult into the first chamber.

"Make them quick kills," Mephistis told him. "We will raise the adults and send them to feed on their people as a diversion. Give the hunters something to worry about besides catching us. I want to be on our way by dark."

He carried the woman to the inner chamber, threw her down beside Margren, and staked her out. Mephistis drew his baneblade, cutting away the woman's clothes. She tried to scream, but only frantic gargling noises emerged for Mephistis had torn out her tongue when he first took her. He stroked the blade along her body, contemplating where to put it in that he would find most satisfying. Then he decided and opened his pants, lifting himself out. His member was hard and ready. He entered her, still stroking her with the blade as he thrust deeper, moving rhythmically. He shoved the blade in repeatedly as he moved to start the process of death, striking organs that could kill in hours. He did not intend to take hours, but he wanted to taste her pain.

Like healers, the sa'necari were also Readers, knowing the body of their victims down to the cellular level if they choose to extend their awareness that deep, which they rarely did. The gift was used mainly to find the organs and arteries, targets for their blades, or simply to track the progression of a dying victim, to savor the way their bodies failed them, the taste of trauma. He slid his finger across her breasts, locating the aortic arch. Mephistis shoved the baneblade in precisely at a slight angle beside the woman's breastbone, meticulously severing the aorta. He withdrew the blade, licking it clean, sheathing it at his side, all without missing a beat in his rhythm as he slid in and out of her warm wetness. She died in minutes, her heart's blood emptying into her chest. Mephistis climaxed as she died, his seed fountaining into her corpse.

The swift, intense ecstasy of her soul shattering and half of its essence being sucked into Mephistis' dark core as he took mortgiefan, caused his awareness to tilt and for an instant he was sheathed in the body of another, hearing another woman scream in anguish, her face suffused over that of the dead woman beneath him as a seizure ripped through her.

"She's alive," Mephistis gasped. "Aejystrys Rowan is alive!" He had gotten so close

to having the death-gift from her that they were linked, every time he took it from another she would feel it also – just as if he took it from her – the paladin would feel herself die with him inside her again and again. It almost made the burning hunger for her death-gift bearable. Almost. Once he had gotten Margren to safety, he would go after Aeijys again – next time he would kill her as he had this one. Next time there would be no mistakes, no interference.

He opened the wound more with his blade, pressing his face into it, lapping warm blood from the chest cavity as if it were a bowl. Sated, he cupped his hands and dipped blood from the dead woman's chest, filling Margren's wound and mouth with it, speaking the second rite of binding. He would overcome the power of the blade that killed her with his own.

\* \* \* \*

Bodramet stripped away the child's clothes, pinning her struggling body easily. He nuzzled her belly, licking her. His fangs lengthened. He bit into her lower abdomen, ripping and tearing away the flesh. She screamed on and on. He savored her pain as he fed on her entrails and organs. His hands formed claws. He shoved them up between her ribs, tearing her heart loose. The screams stopped abruptly. He bit into the heart, sucking the blood out, and then began to chew it. His attention shifted to the male, bound, and gagged, watching in horror as the sa'necari ate his child.

Bodramet reasoned that since the nearest village was a small one and Sharani males so rare, this male was likely the village stud, owned in common by the women; he had probably sired every child there. That sent a delightful image into his mind with an irresistible urge to describe it.

"I will have your death-gift," Bodramet said, still chewing on the child's heart. "Then I will raise you and send you off to eat your children."

He thought briefly of Margren. The noise of Mephistis coupling with her corpse had been impossible to ignore. Bodramet sneered in Mephistis' direction. What would his arrogant scion say were he to learn that Bodramet had not only been riding the bitch while she lived, but he had been the first one inside her corpse?

\* \* \* \*

Mephistis settled Margren's blanket wrapped body across a horse, tying her securely. Bodramet emerged behind him, leading the two zombies they had hastened into undeath. The male's slashed throat gaped open; he carried a small arm torn from the child's body, gnawing on it as he shuffled into the darkness. The female followed him.

Mephistis mounted, his power dominated the animals' awareness, and kept them calm enough to ride as the zombies passed. Bodramet swung into the saddle beside him. They set out in the opposite direction from the undead, Mephistis leading. They

needed to be far from there before the next two nights when Margren would require feeding and he might have to fight to control her until she emerged from the initial animalistic state of a revenant.

\* \* \* \*

They reached the north border of the Rowan Mar'ajanate, the Arris River, as dawn crept up over the still distant mountains. Mephistis remembered with satisfaction taking mortgiefan from Aejustrys' daughter, Laeoli, on those banks last autumn. The fords were solidly iced over with a thick, crisp layer of snow concealing its wet depths. The horses had no problems crossing and they entered the Mar'ajanate of Aluin unnoted except for a pair of woodcutters who waved at them in a friendly fashion. Mephistis nodded back, letting them think they were simple travelers. They passed through the village of Farennd around noon and although Bodramet wanted to stop and investigate the isolated grog shop at the north edge Mephistis kept them riding until they were deep in the ironwoods at the foot of the southernmost spur of the Iradrim mountains. There they stopped to rest the horses, giving each a nosebag of grain and made themselves a meal of dried fruit, cheese, and jerky, washing it down with blood. Bodramet looked unhappy with this and Mephistis choose not to remark on it. He understood that Bodramet was at that point in sa'necari development where he preferred blood from still-living veins and his meat still pulsing. Mephistis, having been born sa'necari had passed though that stage early since it had awakened in him at the onset of puberty. In the safety of his ma'aram's large holdings in the Mar'ajanate of Danae he had been fed on criminals, slaves and those of her political rivals unfortunate enough to fall into her hands. His ma'aram, Aevrina Coleth had been among the first Sharani ruling nobles to be successfully subverted by the Waejontori. When her coup failed, Aevrina had been executed and her lands forfeit. That was in the early days of the Great War. Despite this, Mephistis felt certain that if they could reach Danae, he could find allies there, as not all of his ma'aram's supporters had been uncovered. They would help him escape to Waejontori held territory.

They turned northwest, striking out through the woodlands toward Danae in late afternoon. Then his only worry would be to find some isolated village or human habitation before nightfall when Margren would awaken ravenous: if she rose without other food, she would try to eat him or Bodramet. While he had no compunctions about giving her Bodramet, he preferred otherwise as he might need the sa'necari to help him reach his allies; more to the point though, sa'necari blood was very potent and he did not want Margren to become too strong, too fast since that would make her harder to handle.

Luck was with him and they found an isolated farmstead just as the sun was setting. The two-story building had stonewalls with a thatched and wattled roof. Bodramet started for the door, grinning hugely.

"No," Mephistis shook his head. "I want you well away from here until dawn. She'll

wake soon. Besides, I saw several people in the fields, more than enough to sate you."

Bodramet nodded. He did not want to deal with a revenant as potentially powerful as Margren. He remounted and rode off into the fields, back the way they had come: they had seen someone working out there. Mephistis knocked on the door. A large, muscular farmer answered. Her dark hair was caught in a tail at her neck.

"What do you want?" She asked suspiciously.

Mephistis smiled serenely. "You," he said, his hand darting out so quickly she could not react before he caressed her cheek and took her mind.

Her mouth went slack, her eyes dulled.

He scanned the cottage. The first floor was a single room filled with four chairs covered in wooly throws, a spinning wheel with a basket of wool near a large loom with a half finished cloth in a bright geometric pattern. To the right of it all was the hearth with a bubbling cauldron of stew that smelled like cooking mutton and a table. A narrow stair started midway between the dining area and the workspace. The bedrooms were upstairs.

"Follow me," Mephistis gestured. The farmer stepped outside and, at Mephistis' gesture and nod, retrieved Margren's body. They took her in and laid her out between the chairs in the workspace. Mephistis unwrapped her nude body, straightening her limbs, running his fingers through her hair. Once Margren was satiated, he would try to calm her and bring her mind back. Even should she resist and remain a revenant for eternity, he could not bear to harm her. He would always love her.

"Sit," he told the farmer who obeyed without a sound. "Are there children?"

The farmer nodded.

"How many?"

"Three."

"Ages?"

"Four, six, and fourteen."

A smile broadened. Perhaps he could keep the oldest as a treat if he could control Margren. Mephistis' body had begun to ache and burn at midday, lending credence to the old stories of death from mortgiefan theft. Certainly the pain was getting worse and not better. He needed to secure the children. Mephistis started up the stairs. The upper floor was divided into two bedrooms. He heard a rustle in the room to his left

and snatched the doorknob with a yank. It did not open. He could tell by the way it pulled that someone had put a chair under the knob. The door was sturdy enough to have held a normal man for several minutes: but the sa'necari's strength was far beyond that of mere humans. He kicked it hard, shattering the door and the chair both. A youth was lowering the six year old out the window while the four year old crouched terrified beside her.

"You next," the youth said, grasping the child by the hands.

"Neither of you next." Mephistis snarled. He was on them in a flash, jerking the child from her sister's grasp and throwing her across the room. He grabbed at the youth, but she kicked him in the face, whirled, and went out the window. Mephistis cursed as he peered down at them. They paused to quickly exchange words, and then raced off. Margren was too close to rising for him to go after them. Behind him the four year old sobbed in terror. Mephistis knelt beside her, stilling her sobs with the touch of his hands and mind. She crumpled. He closed the window, sealing it with a spell. He wondered briefly, as he entered the next room to seal it, how Bodramet was doing with those still out in the field. With any luck, the escaped children would head for the fields and Bodramet would kill them. Counting the beds, he realized there were three more adults still out there. Three farmers would be no problem for Bodramet; in fact Bodramet would feast while Mephistis would probably have to content himself with the stew instead of blood.

Mephistis brought the four year old down and laid her silent, bespelled form beside Margren. Margren's corpse began to stir and he retreated to the door, which he sealed with a spell. Margren could not leave this hovel now. He would watch her feed, then take control of her. Since he had made her sa'necari and performed the first two rites of binding, he would have some influence, but there still might be a fight. Margren's flesh had a bluish tinge, but the cold winter weather had kept it from turning green with the first onset of rot. That would leave once she fed. With enough blood and raw flesh she would start to look human again.

Her eyes snapped open, red with hunger. She sensed the child beside her and sat up. She smiled, showing a mouth dominated by long needle like fangs. She smiled broader, took the child almost fondly into her arms, and sank her teeth into its stomach. He sensed her satisfaction, the child's terror and agony, the farmer's horror and grief and then something else: distant eyes watching them. They were being scryed. Only someone with a very strong link to him and great mage power could have achieved this bit of spying. He dared not let his full awareness leave Margren, but he insinuated a tiny strand of power into this presence, sliding down the link to find and identify them. Aeijys. Aeijys was scrying them. Then he pulled back, satisfied. Let her see her sister eating the child; it would chill her; put more doubt into her mind; make her more vulnerable to his next assault. The more vulnerable she became the easier and sooner he would be able to kill her through the link and complete the mortgiefan he hungered for.

Margren threw the child's corpse at his feet, grinning at him, taunting him with her eyes. She recognized what he was if not who he was, that meant she was less a mindless revenant than either he or Bodramet had expected. That also meant that she was far more powerful than he had ever dreamed when he made her. She rose to her feet, her eyes flicking from him to the helpless farmer and back again.

"Mine?" she hissed, finding her tongue stiff and words difficult to form.

"Yes." He nodded at the farmer. "Yours. All yours."

She whirled around, seized the farmer, and threw the woman to the ground, flinging herself atop her. Her fangs glinted for a moment in the firelight, then her face bent down as she sank them into the farmer's carotid artery. She slurped and sucked noisily, raising her bloody face from time to time to stare at him, then went back to drinking. The farmer died quickly. When she had consumed the blood, she ripped away the farmer's clothing, opened her stomach, and began to eat the entrails and organs.

Finally she settled back on her haunches, regarding him steadily. "Made me?"

"Yes."

She nodded, thinking about that. "Feed me?"

"I will always feed you."

Mephistis started toward her and she barred her fangs, hissing. He halted, extending his hands and murmuring softly, "Easy. Be easy, beloved."

She cocked her head, frowning, but let him approach. Then she hissed again when he was within reach.

He sent his power out, reaching into her mind. She resisted this intrusion, hissing louder and more threateningly. Mephistis pushed harder, forcing his mind in and finding himself confronted with tremendous strength. Amazed, he pulled back and stared at her. He could simply have taken her by force, at the risk of ripping her mind to shreds; but he wanted her as whole as possible.

"Beloved," he murmured reassuringly.

Her hissing became less threatening. He dropped to his knees beside her, knowing he was taking a terrible chance. He touched her hair, stroking it. She cocked her head like a questioning dog and her hiss faded away. In a flash Mephistis slid a thin lance of power in under her mental guard and took her. She smiled tamely, purring. Mephistis licked the blood off her face while he opened his pants. He fondled her breasts, and then laid her back across the farmer's corpse. She did not respond to his touch, accepting him like a simple dead thing, but he knew that soon she would

start to respond and then she would become fully aware, she would be Margren again. He entered her, beginning to move inside her.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **BROKEN THINGS**

Becca awakened in the wee hours of the morning with a vague sense of unease. She had been doing this more and more since Josh brought Aejs back. Becca had always felt more or less in control of her life, even when it had been far from what she wished it to be. The condition of Aejs' hands upset Becca, seeing the ha'taren crippled sent her into periodic crying jags in the privacy of her office with the door locked. There was almost nothing that the paladin could do for herself. Becca kept servants sitting within earshot in the little parlor and occasionally in the room with Aejs herself. A few of the guards and drivers came up to visit from time to time from the fifth day on, sharing their anecdotes and tales of past adventure, some of it fairly humorous and Becca appreciated hearing Aejs laugh. She suspected that Omer and Raim were deliberately pressuring their comrades into coming up to talk, since most of them had never so much as engaged in casual conversation with Lord Aejs before: as the very first drivers Aejs had hired, Omer and Raim were the most comfortable with her of all of them and quite accustomed to sitting and talking with her about anything and everything. But at night, sometimes she thought she heard noise coming from Aejs' rooms.

This time she was certain of it. She got out of bed, threw a robe around her, and walked down the hall. She entered the parlor and found Omer sitting with Molly. They looked downcast. Omer was not among those she had originally assigned to be in the room at night.

"What are you doing here?" she asked suspiciously.

"Relieving Molly," Omer told her.

"I've had him doing it since the first night," Molly spoke up. "I did not want you upset with my reasons. You've got enough to worry and concern you as it is."

"What are you talking about?"

Just then a low, almost whimpering sound came from the bedroom. Becca frowned and walked in, followed by Omer and Molly.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Night-terrors," Omer told her, in a low voice. "We didn't want the rest of the household to know about it. Raim and myself, we've seen it before. Molly too. So

the three of us have been taking turns up here. What happened at Dragonshead... It hit her hard. Along with a lot of other stuff. A few of us knew about Bucharsa. We'd heard rumors. She nearly wound up undead."

Becca paled.

Aejys muttered in her sleep. "Laeoli. Laeoli..." Then a low sob emerged.

"Her daughter," Becca supplied.

Molly nodded toward the parlor and they slipped out. They sat around the table in silence. "It might have been kinder..." Molly said, at last. "Merciful... if Josh and those lifemages had not brought her back."

"Why?" Becca was aghast at the suggestion.

"She's been broken," Omer said. "They broke her, deliberately. I know she seems all right at times. But at night it seems to close tight around her. I've seen it before. I think she was just beginning to get over the horrors at Bucharsa, and then this..."

Molly nodded. "Day times she uses anger to get past it. Like a crutch. I think she's leaning too heavily on it."

Omer sighed, his handsome face tightening. "I'd like to kill that sister of hers."

"No!" Becca said sharply and seeing Omer's scowl, rephrased it. "No, I meant what they did to her, not your wanting to kill her sister. I'd do it myself if I could."

Molly reached over and patted her hands. "Becca, dear, she's been broken. Trust me, she's not the same person who left last summer. Much of the strength is gone. You haven't set with her at night ... listened to her moaning and whimpering. The way she sometimes screams into the pillows in the grip of the night-terrors, waking in cold sweats. She isn't right."

"I don't think this will seriously impair her judgment. We're not saying that, Becca," Omer interjected, seeing her troubled expression. "She seems to have it pretty much under control in the daytime. But it might make some of the household wonder and if it got out, Cedarbird would use it against her and us." Omer put his hand over Becca's, trying to be reassuring.

"Yes. He would," Becca conceded. "You should have told me."

"We did not want to worry you," Molly said gently. "I've heard those crying jags of yours."

Becca flushed. "Well, now I know. You just keep on like you've been doing."

"We will," Molly told her, patting her other hand, then got up and hugged her.

\* \* \* \*

Taun stirred from a restless dream, reaching for Skree in the darkness. Finding him gone, the little nerien sat up and looked about the room. He could barely make out the triton standing near the door, half-leaning on the door facing. Then he heard the soft whimpering from the next room. "What is it?" Taun asked, climbing out of bed. He covered his nakedness with a green dressing robe and joined his mate.

Skree turned slightly to look at him. "Aejys. I have listened to it for several nights. They broke her."

"I don't understand," Taun said, catching the undercurrent in his mate's words. "She seems all right."

"By day, when there are things to distract her, yes – but at night? No."

"I need to go to her."

"There is nothing you can do for her, little seal," Skree told him, catching his arm before he could leave. "It is the spirit and heart – perhaps the mind also. I don't know yet. I have only spoken to her a few times."

"But she's the Lion of Rowanslea..." Taun protested.

"Any one can be broken. Even I could be in the right circumstances. It is hubris to think otherwise. You are too young to remember the seiryn wars. My grandfather was a strong male – until the seiryn caught him. They shattered him. I was too young to fight, but not too young to know and recognize what they did."

\* \* \* \*

Becca did not go back to bed. Instead she went to her office and spent the rest of the hours until dawn making entries in her ledger-book. By the time the sun came up, however, Becca had an agenda of her own firmly in mind. She went to Aejys' room and sat in the overstuffed chair beside the bed: she wanted to know what had happened and she was tired of waiting for Aejys to volunteer the information. Last summer Aejys had still been playing tongue-in-cheek head-games on Cedarbird that they all laughed about afterwards. Now she was making dire threats and actually taking steps against him, including making Becca her heir. Something had definitely changed. She could see it now. There was a hard edge to Aejys that had not been there before.

Becca fell silent for a long space, looking for a good way to phrase her question since tact was not one of her finer points and she knew it.

"Waiting for something, Becca?" Aeijys said, her voice soft and tired. "What is it?" She no longer insisted on Josh's presence, though she always felt better when he was there. After the touch of shared-life, she felt more able to deal with her nightmares alone – at least in the daytime – as if part of him remained with her always.

"It shows that much?"

"Yes, it shows." She turned her head to look fully at the tavern master. "Is it Cedarbird?"

Becca grinned uncomfortably, inclining her head. "I have him on my mind... But no, I just want to know what happened on your journey. Such as how many survived."

Aeijys winced inwardly at the memory of how many had not survived. "I can tell you up until I was taken a day's ride from Castle Rowan. Past that you'll have to ask Josh."

"Fair enough."

Aeijys told her about the manticores attacking on the road to St. Tarmus, how they wore a charm around their neck which proved later to be Margren's: three rowans gripped by a large dragon. At the monastery harpies and winged demons attacked them; that was where Cassana Odaren died from an assassin's arrow meant for Aeijys; later her guard was ambushed and suffered heavy casualties at the hands a large orc army and the charms kept appearing. It was during the orc battle that Josh and Clemmerick finally overtook them, helping to turn the tide from imminent defeat to victory. She alluded to her falling in love with Tamlestari enough that Becca understood without her having to say it aloud. The last major assault came as they were leaving Vallimrah by an army of vargeis. When she came to the part where she learned that both her daughter, Laeoli, and her na'halaef, Ladonys, had been slain by Margren's followers, she choked up and fell silent. Tears ran freely down her battered face: she could not wipe them away with her splinted hands. Becca pulled a soft cloth from the nightstand, one of the fresh unused bandages, and gently patted her face dry. Aeijys told her then of how close Shaurone had come to being taken by a Waejontori coup d'etat led by her sister and her sister's lover, Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan; the intervention on her behalf by the Old Man of the Mountains, the Grand Master of the Assassins guild that served the god Hadyjs the Dark Judge, had uncovered and revealed the plot in time for action to be taken by all the mar'ajans and the Saer'ajan Zaren. But Aeijys' ma'aram, her bloodmother, had refused to act on the documents, believing them to be just another ploy to discredit her younger daughter, Margren. She did not add that had her ma'aram acted on the documents she would never have been taken and tortured by Margren – that was too bitter a thought for her to speak. Nor did she tell her what had happened to her at Dragonshead, for she could not bear to even think about it: her wounds would have to speak for themselves.

Aejys felt as if she had been punished for being strong, while Margren had been rewarded for being weak... She had given her ma'aram, Kaethreyn, everything she demanded and in the end found herself abandoned in spite of it. Perhaps she had never been loved at all—perhaps it had all been an illusion. Perhaps she had been lying to herself then about her ma'aram's feelings. And in the end what had she seen in Kaethreyn's face? Had it been grief or guilt? She might never know.

"Your sister has become a very powerful mage."

"My sister is sa'necari," Aejys snarled in a sudden flaring of anger. "She betrayed her family, her people, and her very race. The last thing I remember is my ma'aram releasing me from my vow. I am now free to destroy Margren. And I will see her in hell if it's the last act of my life."

Becca folded her arms across her stomach, feeling the force of the paladin's rage as if it were a hammer slammed into the core of her being: the change in Aejys from the easy going, mellow soldier who had ridden out last summer into this implacable, dangerous woman disturbed her. The change was understandable considering all that had happened to her. Becca wondered if this side of Aejys had always existed, if this was the way she had been during the Great War. The unyielding, aggressive way Aejys handled Cedarbird, reflected this. It was necessary, but it also was very hard to accept and deal with. Becca decided then to find Josh and get the rest of the story. She wished Clemmerick were there to discuss this change with her, to help her deal with it. In the future, Becca knew, she would hesitate to bring problems to Aejys' attention: she would try harder to solve them herself.

\* \* \* \*

Josh had a single large room with a bed in the northeast corner shoved tight against the walls covered in blue and green quilts. The small fireplace in the west wall warmed the room nicely. A modest oblong table stood near the fireplace, flanked by two simple chairs with small cushions tied to their seats. Josh sat in a third chair, large and over-stuffed with clawed arms and legs that occupied the floor between the table and the bed.

Taun carried one of the chairs from the table and placed it beside Josh, then sat down. He leaned forward. "Just relax. I want to get a clear Reading. Not like the hasty one I did the night we quarreled over the bottle."

Josh nodded and extended his arm to Taun. He doubted the nerien would tell him anything he did not already know for Tamlestari had Read him last summer, telling him then that he was killing himself with drink. He was not suicidal, nor did he care whether he died or not, but many times death seemed like a good idea – and when the pain, emptiness and nightmares came to visit he wished for it with all his heart.

Taun gripped Josh's wrist and closed his eyes, concentrating deeply. The first thing he noticed was that Josh was clearly much younger than he appeared, maybe by as

much as fifteen years. Then he allowed his attention to be drawn to the lower organs. There was damage everywhere, but the worst of it was Josh's liver, which he perceived as having spreading black splotches of deterioration. He released Josh's wrist and sat back with a sigh. "Your liver. That is what is going to kill you. Every time you drink heavily you destroy pieces of it. Eventually it will cease to function. Your body will poison itself and you will collapse."

"It isn't easy to stop. I've been drinking since I was seven. I started when the magic was burned out."

Taun nodded. "Then again, you could simply have a severe toxic reaction to the drink and die."

Josh frowned at his hands. He felt that Taun was not listening to him. Aeijys wanted him to stop drinking. He wanted to stop drinking. But when he did he would have to deal with the pain in his body, the burning in his nerve endings, the muscles crawling under his skin – and he would have the nightmares again waking and sleeping, the myriad dark memories tormenting him. "If you want me to stop drinking, then you must find something in your satchel to help me."

Taun's face brightened. "Becca told me about your problems, especially as a result of the burn out. I have never seen anything like it before, but I have a special blend I made up yesterday that may help. You surrender to me your flask of whiskey and I will give you the medicine. I also intend to lock up Aeijys' liquor cabinet."

Josh pulled his silver flask from his shirt pocket, extending it to Taun. His stomach knotted up and he wanted desperately to hug the bottle and run. But he forced himself past it. Taun took the flask, handing him a glass one wrapped in leather.

"This is a very good thing, Josh," Taun told him. "Especially since I think Aeijys loves you."

Josh's eyes widened and he stared dumbfounded at the little healer. "You truly think so? I mean – I – I love her so very much..."

"Yes, I truly think so. I've seen the way she looks at you."

"I hate to break this little session up," Becca said, poking her head in the door, "but I need to talk to Josh awhile myself. Privately, Taun. Okay?"

\* \* \* \*

"Aeijys, you need to hear this," Becca said, entering the room with Josh in tow. She dismissed the servant with a nod, dragging the chair by the window seat over beside the chair nearest the bed. Josh was sober, scrubbed, and wearing clean clothing at Becca's insistence. She caught him by the arm, propelling him into the second chair, leaving the one nearest the bed for herself.

"Help me sit." Aeijys tried to get up using her elbows and pushing with her legs to bring her shoulder against the headboard. She cursed Margren silently: Her sister had been thorough and except for her legs there was not a place on her body that did not hurt when she moved. She had not yet allowed herself to grieve for the loss of her daughter and halaefs: that would come in time, but for now she clung to her anger and that kept the rest at bay. To let out the grief, to let herself experience it, threatened to overwhelm her precarious self-control and she would not – she could not allow that to happen, not now, maybe not ever.

Becca took Aeijys under the left arm trying to help her into a sitting position, struggling to neither pull too much on her wounded shoulder nor touch her hideously scourged back. A low, involuntary groan forced its way from Aeijys' throat despite her attempt to stifle it and the tavern master's effort to be gentle. Becca put pillows behind Aeijys, but their softness was not enough to prevent momentary stiffening when her torn back first touched them. Aeijys closed her eyes, waiting for the pain to subside a little and to find the focus necessary to push past what remained. She did not like to face things lying down; it just emphasized her feelings of helplessness and frustration with her wounded body, feelings that crept back in no matter how hard she resisted them. She knew her enemies would not hold off just because she needed time to heal – if anything her condition would encourage them to move against her that much more quickly to try and take her out before she was strong enough to fight back.

Aeijys opened her eyes, taking in the serious expression on Becca's face, seeing that Josh looked more miserable than she had ever seen him, his shoulders hunched and his eyes fastened on his hands gripped together so tightly the knuckles whitened. "So what is it? Cedarbird?"

"No," Becca answered. "I've brought you the rest of the story."

"Well?" Aeijys frowned, worry settling around her heart. *Who else had she lost? Tag? Clemmerick? Oh, Gods, please not Tamlestari and the children!* "Who else did I lose?"

Josh sighed heavily, and then spoke without lifting his head. "Margren and your ma'aram are dead."

"Both of them." Aeijys felt stunned, her stomach empty and hollow as a dark pit. It was not as bad as she had feared and yet... She had such intensely mixed feelings toward her ma'aram. Her eyes dropped to the heavy quilted comforter, tracing the pattern of its deep red and orange Vorgeni circles within circles. All her anger and bitterness toward Kaethreyn drained away. She remembered better times with her ma'aram, before Margren had created a wedge between them with her jealous insecurities, insisting that Aeijys intended her harm when in fact it was the other way around, forcing Kaethreyn to demand that vow of her which had ultimately cost the

lives of her two halaefs and their child. Kaethreyn's mortal flaw had been to love too deeply and without wisdom. Now she would never know what it was she had seen in her ma'aram's face – never know if she had been loved. "Ma'aram, I'm sorry. Forgive me." She lifted her eyes again. "How did it happen?"

Josh looked less miserable, but still very uncomfortable, having apparently gotten the worst of it out. At least he was no longer staring at his hands. "Uh, when you ... when you..." he could not say the word, could barely let himself acknowledge the fact that for a little while Aejys had been dead and struggled for a different one. "When she ... lost you. She killed Margren with the same blade she – Margren hurt you with. Margren's retainer killed Kaethreyn and Geoa Odaren killed that retainer. I cast Revelation, setting the mark of the dragon on all who supported Margren and Mephistis. Everyone in the castle and the city."

"Did anyone take Margren's head and heart?" Aejys' voice went flat, distant as she tried not to look directly at a nightmare.

"Don't know." Josh said softly, thinking hard.

"Then she could have risen." Aejys prodded gently, her tone quiet: Josh looked stressed enough to bolt and she did not want that. *And if she has risen, I'm going after her. She and Mephistis will pay for my family's deaths .*

"Risen?" questioned Becca, sending Aejys a startled glance.

"As necari, their undead form."

Becca shivered, going a shade paler. "There's just a little more to the story," she said, returning the subject to where they left off before Aejys started inquiring further about Margren. Becca did not want to think about undead anything, just knowing such things existed made her skin crawl. "Josh?"

Josh nodded. "After they left me alone with you, the ghosts came out. They showed me how to restart your heart and breathing, then they mended those stomach wounds."

"That's why I'm alive, not undead."

Josh nodded.

"Josh," Becca asked. "How many ghosts?"

"Nine."

"Aejys, remember those rings, those lifemage rings? There were nine of them. I don't know why, but I think it's important. Taun says there are no lifemages left. That the sa'necari killed them all."

"Genocide."

Becca nodded. "That's what Taun called it."

"Tradition has it that the lifemages held the key to destroying vast armies of the undead. They, alone, had the power to undo the death magics of the sa'necari. If they are all gone, then this entire world could already be doomed. But if there is any other way to stop those bloody necromancers, then I swear by My God, I'll find it."

Aejys bolted upright shaking her splinted hands at the heavens in rage, cursing her sister in a long string of vile epithets and dark promises for her part in the destruction of the lifemages, for the deaths of her daughter and her halaefs, for the death of her ma'aram. When her rage began to flag and the accompanying adrenaline rush started to crash, exhaustion and a crescendo of agony swept through her: she had pushed herself too far, too soon. She dropped back against the pillows, pale and breathing hard, her heart racing.

"Josh," Becca grabbed the sot. "Get Taun, quickly."

\* \* \* \*

Taun's mouth drew up in an unhappy frown as he laid Aejys' wrist back on the bed. He glanced at Becca and Josh, who had retreated to the window seat when he arrived, for support as he told Aejys, "You need to rest. Those wounds are barely over a week old and you've got them bleeding again." He poured four fingers of holadil into a small glass.

"No." Aejys shook her head, obstinately. "I must talk to the sea-mage."

"You need to rest," Taun repeated. "Rest now, talk to Skree later."

"Now," Aejys insisted, her tone verging on a low growl. "I must speak to him now."

"A compromise. You take a small swallow of this, not enough to put you out, and I'll get him. Once you've talked, you take the rest."

"No."

Taun shook his head ruefully, after a week of caring for his lord, he was beginning to feel more confident and determined in matters of her health, more ready to argue with her. "When it comes to your health, I rank you. Furthermore, Skree is just as obstinate as you are and he will not come here unless I ask him myself. And I am not asking him unless you give in a little bit. Have we a compromise?"

"Shit." Aejys nodded. "Just a small swallow. Then I want my pipe."

Taun beamed, holding the glass to her lips. Aejys took that small swallow and turned her face away. "Pipe?"

"I'll get it," Becca volunteered, exchanging places with Taun.

\* \* \* \*

Skree arrived a few minutes later, dressed in his long green robes, his hair loose about him. He sat down in the chair nearest the bed, resting his elbows on his knees as he leaned closer to Aejys. "Taun tells me you will not rest until we have spoken."

"Do you have the farsight or scry?"

Skree's thin lips took a skeptical turn. "Why, landsmon? Whatever could be so important to you that you cannot rest without knowing? Your ill health? Does it frighten you that bad?"

Aejys scowled at him, saying bluntly, "My sister was sa'necari."

Skree stiffened visibly, shooting a sharp glance at Taun, reminding him of their conversation three days past. "And what does that make you?"

"I am ha'taren, a paladin of Aroana." Aejys met his scowl levelly, daring him to dispute that fact. "My sister did this to me." She waved her splinted hands at her face and along her body where clothing concealed the many bandages beneath. "She was the mastermind – or her lover was – of the genocide of the lifemages. I have proof of that."

"I cannot help you," Skree said, rising. "One of your blood is sa'necari. You admit it."

"You can let me finish." The force of command was in Aejys' voice, verging on anger. "Hear me out or see this world die." The statement was extreme, but that was how Aejys saw it at that moment.

Skree flinched, it was widely believed among his people that if left unchecked the sa'necari would slay the very earth itself. "What are you saying?"

"Margren was slain. I need to know if she's risen, undead. She is the spearhead of an undeclared war against Shaurone. What the sa'necari could not take by force, they now try to take by treachery and subterfuge. If she has risen, then I must find a way to destroy her."

"You?" Skree sneered. "You can't even stand."

"I'll heal. It snows deep in Shaurone and deeper still in Waejontor. No one is moving an army before the spring thaw. When they move this time it will be with an

army of undead that will simply roll across the living like one of those tidal waves. I will find a way to stop her – stop them both. I'm going to cut her head off and rip her heart out. My family will be avenged. And if I must find another mage to answer my questions, then I will."

Skree studied the ha'taren, even without rapport he could sense the iron determination radiating from her, and he knew with certainty that she would make good on her promises. "Tonight the moon is full, the tides are high. I will return at midnight and we will see what we can see. For now, rest, listen to Taun." The triton turned, departing the room.

Taun moved to the bedside, raising the unfinished glass of holadil to Aeijys' lips. She drank and the warmth of the drug raced swiftly through her, drawing her down into sleep and healing. Taun removed the extra pillows, lowering her to the bed, and covered her with the blankets.

The nerien settled into a chair and watched her sleep. Even in her weakened state, the Lion of Rowanslea lived up to her legends and Taun knew that she had finally won Skree over.

\* \* \* \*

Aeijys' eyes traced the grain in the dark wood ceiling, waiting for midnight and Skree's return. She hated the stillness. In the silence thought and memory became a roar. Nightmares and flashbacks darted through in tiny electric discharges, stinging sharply yet gone before they could be grasped. Sometimes she would cry out and then not know exactly why she had done so. A deep-seated sense of futility and despair hovered about her more often than not. Becca tried to keep her occupied during her waking hours. The company she sent up would help for a bit, but as soon as they left she sank back down into the spiritual miasma. She thought about death a lot: death as release from the shadows in her mind and heart; release from the unending pain in her body: then she would flashback over what it had felt like to die and weep silently in the grip of her inner terrors. Anger was the only emotion strong enough to fully banish them, but she could not hold onto her anger: eventually it dissolved and slipped through her fingers.

Worry and anger caused her body to fight off the effects of the holadil and wake early. The sea-mage's comment about her weakness haunted her. At her request, Molly had lit the lamp again and left it burning: bright illumination bathed the room. She wished it were as easy to burn away the dark corners of her heart and thoughts. She had been freed of the vow barring her from directly opposing Margren, found her way back to her god and made peace between them, she was again ha'taren, a paladin of Aroana, but at what price? What could she realistically hope to do against her sister with these ruined hands? She stared at the splinted fingers and palms. Without the intervention of a lifemage, and there were none left, those hands would never wield a weapon again. If she did mount an expedition, she would not be able

to fight; she would be a burden to them. She had always led her troops, not simply commanded them from the rear, how could she ask them to die for her when she could not share their risks? For the first time in her life she was the one who needed protection, not the one doing the protecting. A wave of bitterness soured her stomach; but it tasted far better than the despair it had pushed aside.

"Laeoli, Ladonys, Brendorn, Cassana. I will have vengeance. Somehow, somehow, I will destroy Margren if she still exists," she growled. "And if she doesn't then I'll go after Mephistis. I'll have his head whether she still exists or not. Where there is a will, there is a way. I will find it. I swear I will find it."

*And then she found herself filling with doubt and shame. Am I still ha'taren? Or is that a lie? Am I lying to myself again? She does not answer to one whose body and soul have the taint of undeath on them. Is mine unclean? If I should die, will I rise and harm those I love most?*

\* \* \* \*

Against Taun's better judgment, Skree moved Aejs from the bed to an overstuffed chair beside it. He placed a small table before her and sat down in the second chair. Skree blew out all the lights except one, which sat on the table beside a large silver bowl with leaping dolphins and mermaids around the rim interspersed with the god Nerindalori's rune. A little light shone through the door from the parlor to which he had temporarily banished Becca, Josh, and Taun. A silver ewer of water, a vial of oil, and a small pair of scissors framed the bowl.

"You are certain you want to do this, landsmon? You may not like what you see."

Aejs gave a low hiss. "I know I'm not going to like what I see, but I need to know."

"So be it. What you see may have already happened, be happening now, or has not happened yet. There is no way to know for certain." Skree poured water into the bowl, added three drops of oil, then made several passes of his hands above it. He turned, cutting a single strand of hair from Aejs' head, adding that into the bowl. The water bubbled and steam rose from it. When it finally settled and the water cleared again, Skree indicated that Aejs should look.

The first thing she saw was a calico mother cat, nursing two male kittens, one black, the other white. Aejs shook her head, not knowing what to make of that. Then the water in the bowl turned gray, clearing again to show a sword thrust through a gleaming black stone orb sitting on a mountaintop. Again Aejs shook her head, she had no idea what either meant, and Skree offered no illumination. Finally a third scene appeared, a crouching woman bent over a small child in her arms. A chill went through Aejs and she shivered, finding the image inexplicably disturbing. As she watched the woman lifted her head. Now Aejs could see that the child in her lap had her stomach ripped out. The woman had long fangs, blood rimmed her mouth,

but her face was unmistakably familiar. Aeijys closed her eyes, looking away. "Enough. I have my answer."

Skree snapped his long fingers and the contents of the bowl vanished. "Your sister?"

"Yes." Aeijys felt her anger at her ma'aram rise again: if it had not been for that vow, the perfidy of Margren would ended long ago when Margren had drawn a knife on her in the High Meadows, she would not now be eating children. Children! "Damn her soul to Hadjys! This will end. I swear by Aroana's sword and shield, horn and willow, by all that is holy and pure, this will end! My life and soul be forfeit if I falter."

Skree had never heard an Aroanan oath before, but he recognized the pattern of an unbreakable ritual vow. "I will not enter your service as Taun has, but henceforth, I am your ally. Whatever aid I can give your cause, ask and you will receive."

"Then I am in your debt and offer you the same."

Skree rose, ready to lift her from the chair and return her to the bed.

"One more thing," Aeijys said, and he stopped. "Taun tells me you are a better Reader than he where magic working on the body is concerned."

"I am a mage as well as a Reader, that makes me sensitive to a broader range of things than Taun."

Aeijys hesitated, screwing up her courage. "The blade that cut me. It was a baneblade, you know what that is?"

"Yes. It cuts the soul as well as the body. The victims usually rise as undead."

"The lifemages that helped Josh bring me back could have taken that from me, but I worry that they did not ... did not have enough strength to do that. Can you read such a thing in me?"

"No. I cannot tell you if your soul is damaged or unclean because it does not involve the conscious use or even simple possession of dark powers. You would need a spiritworker or soul Reader, preferably a priest."

"There is only one in this area that I know of. The oracle priest of the Willowhorn can tell me. If I should die before the weather and my body will allow me to make the journey, one of you must take my head and heart. Take no chances. Undeath is what I most fear."

"You have my word." Skree reached out and gripped her arm in acknowledgment of his promise. Then he lifted her from the chair, carrying her back to bed. "Taun

will want to Read you again." As he started to leave, he paused a moment and turned back, adding as an afterthought. "For a landsmon, you make a decent master. Taun is not dishonored by being in your service. I approve of you, Aeijstrys Rowan."

\* \* \* \*

Sitting as upright as Taun wanted her to while he changed her bandages made Aeijys' stomach hurt. Much of the tenderness had left her back; but her stomach, chest, and shoulder were healing at a much slower rate. Changing the bandages seemed an interminable process and although he was gentle and cautious she could not completely suppress a groan when he touched tender areas or required her to move. Furthermore, the pain was starting to make her nauseous.

"You are the very first landsmon in over a score of years to really impress Skree. He does not like landsmyn as a rule. He said just a little while ago that your honor is great. Honor, that is something he holds in high regard."

"Honor, Taun, is a painful thing. Because I honored my vow to my bloodmother, my halaefs and our daughter are dead. Honor is a cage, a prison. If you make a dog sleep in a cage every night, after awhile that cage becomes its den, its home. If one night you leave the door open the dog will still go in there to sleep and you will find it there the next morning. In a sense I am the dog and I still live there, in my cage. I don't know how to live otherwise. You know what Tagalong calls me?"

"No." Taun shook his head.

"A 'puddin head paladin' and she's right. She's absolutely right. That's what honor will do to you."

"I try to do the right thing."

"It is not the same. If circumstances get too tough, you can back out. You can change your mind. I cannot."

Taun finished with the last bandage, gesturing that she could lie back against the pillows. He wanted to dispute that, but he could not. He had after all first promised himself that he would stay with his mother's people in the Neridian Isles as a healer, but when his mixed species heritage brought unending disapproval he had fled to the mainland only to find just as much of it among his father's people. In the end Taun had come to Vorgensburg, hoping to find, in this place of many races, acceptance – which he would never have found, even here, had Becca not learned of him and taken him in. All the while Skree honored his declared lifemating with Taun, when it would have been easier for the sea-mage to have gone home than to have borne the suspicions and outright cruelties of the landsmyn. Taun felt suddenly dirty, talking about honor. "I could never–never have it the way you and Skree do." *I'm not strong enough* .

"You have ethics," Aeijys said, "it is almost the same thing, but maybe better, because when you make a mistake you can go a different direction. When I take a direction, commit myself to an action, I must continue to the end even when I realize later it is the wrong direction."

"Are you saying you have taken the wrong direction... with this vow?"

"No," she said, a sad edge entering her voice, "I'm saying that I have in the past and the people who suffered were the ones I loved best. This new vow is merely a turning in the right direction, an atoning for having allowed the situation to get this bad in the first place."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Aeijys forced a smile. "That's my job."

\* \* \* \*

Three days later Aeijys sent for Josh. The nightmares still crowded in around her, especially at night and in still moments during the day; but she tried hard to do without him as much as possible, to try and deal with it alone. When the nightmares were intense enough to wake her screaming, he always appeared at her side, holding her, driving them back with his touch. She decided she needed to tell him about this and more: exactly how she felt about him, for Josh would never broach the subject himself.

"Lock the door," Aeijys said. She sat on the couch in the parlor as Josh came in.

At his questioning look, she added, "We need to talk and I don't want to be disturbed."

"Did I do something wrong?" He locked the door as she had asked.

"No. This isn't exactly about you. Well, it is somewhat. But it's mostly about me." She patted the couch. "You remind me of Brendorn. I never realized it until I started seeing you sober..."

Josh blushed as he settled next to her. "He was a good mon."

"Yes," Aeijys said softly. "I loved him very much. Even when I abandoned him for what I thought were very good reasons – his safety. It was a mistake I will regret as long as I live. I'm not making that mistake again."

Josh dropped his eyes, uncertain of where this was going and beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"Josh, you saved my life. You called me back from the dead. Why? This is more

than just a devoted friendship. I saw it in your eyes the day you called me back. I saw it again in your mind when we melded in Shared Life. So just say it."

Josh looked as if his heart would break from fear, but he said it. "I'm in love with you. For four years now. Ever since that day on the bluffs..."

"Josh, it took a return trip to hell and back to recognize you for what and who you are, but since that day I woke in your arms in Rowanslea I've felt the same." She leaned into him, brushing her lips across his. "Now help me back to bed and climb in with me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Must I make it an order?"

Josh blushed so bright that he could have given a ripe cherry competition. He slipped an arm around her and she leaned part of her weight on him as they moved to the bed. She could feel his heart hammering with excitement as he settled her in the middle. Her splinted hands were no help, so Josh had to undress them both. She watched the way his hands trembled as he revealed first himself and then her. Josh was satisfyingly well hung, sending a tingling eagerness vibrating in her loins. Josh kissed both her breasts, being especially tender and careful with the scarred right nipple. Then he moved down to her feet and began systematically kissing and licking each and every scar, working his way up to the ones on her face and kissed her deeply. By then she was shivering and trembling with need. She was not well enough to participate as actively as she wanted, but Josh was making up for both of them with his passionate thoroughness. Then he entered her, filling her completely. She moaned, wrapping her legs tight around him, pressing him deeper. Josh began to move, pumping gently at first, then seeing that he was not hurting her, harder and faster and deeper, ever deeper, questing for the place of passion deep within her. He found it. Aeajys cried out in ecstasy and his seed exploded within her.

\* \* \* \*

"They've been in there a long time with the door locked," Taun said, frowning. "What do you suppose?"

Becca shot him a lecherous grin. "What do *you* suppose ... he's in love with her."

Taun flushed and fled, believing he himself had set this in motion.

Becca went downstairs to let Molly know that there was no longer a need for anyone to stay in the parlor at night.

## CHAPTER SIX

## TRAITORS

They fled due north for a time, then west with Margren again wrapped in the blanket. She had lost consciousness with the dawn: this stage of her undeath would pass eventually. By the time they reached Danae after four days, she looked passably human and rode beside them. They entered the capital city of Dovane the night before solstice, riding through streets of brightly lit houses. It was a time for visiting and sharing the season's cheer. People were out and about in large numbers. Margren hissed whenever anyone came too close, clearly disturbed, and hungry. Bodramet frowned at Mephistis.

"Don't worry," Mephistis said. "She's on a tight leash."

They drew rein before a large, elegant mansion. Mephistis knocked on the door and a liveried servant answered. The servant wore a deep red tunic and trousers with hunter green banding, the Deshar-Dovane badge on her shoulder – the slumbering gryphon and a coiled snow snake separated by a bar sinister.

"Are you here for the party?" she asked politely, taking in their dusty commoner clothing in a sharp sweep of her eye.

"Yes," Mephistis answered. "We have ridden a long way. Is there somewhere we could freshen up and change?"

"Of course." The servant led them to an upstairs room with a bed and its own water closet.

"Is it possible to see Master Linden for a moment?"

"Who shall I tell her?"

"Mephi. She has not seen me since I was very small."

The servant smiled, nodding, and then left.

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Linden Deshar-Dovane watched the last of the decorations going up in the main hall of her mansion in Dovane City. She was being even more cautious this year than last in the choice of them – nothing overtly religious. Tomorrow was Winter Solstice and the day of God Return. She did not want anything that might make her more illicit guests uncomfortable and give them away to the others who comprised the majority of her guests at this season's big party. Caution kept her alive. She had carefully walked around the edges of Mephistis' attempted coup, which had been scheduled for the next night and, thus, not been discovered and rounded up with the others. She still did not know how the planned coup, to take place in every major city of Shaurone, had been discovered, but she would find out eventually and the party she

was throwing might produce clues. Someone was bound to talk once the wine and liquor had gone around sufficiently to loosen some tongues and the bragging began. Martial law still lay over most of the realm, but the nobility like Linden were excluded from its edicts in consideration of the season and because the search was narrowing rapidly to a single mon: Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan.

The Master of House Deshar-Dovane, knight of Danae, kept the colors limited to those of her own house: deep red with hunter green banding, the Deshar-Dovane badge evident on everything – the slumbering gryphon and a coiled snow snake separated by a bar sinister. The Regent of Danae, the mar'ajanate in which the city was located, had been invited although Linden suspected her cousin would not show. Anaria had no affection for Linden and the constrained animosity was mutual.

"Ajan," the servant interrupted her thoughts, "guests have arrived."

"This early?"

"They've ridden far and requested a place to freshen themselves. Two males and a young woman."

The presence of two males set off alarms –males did not travel much alone or nearly alone–this could only mean sa'necari. Her home was a waystation for the upper echelons. "Did they say who they are?"

"One said you have not seen him since he was a small boy, Mephi."

Goosebumps ran up her arms, turning into a chill along her spine. "Which room? Show me."

"The room for special guests."

Linden nodded and started walking swiftly. They traveled down a long hall, turning right. "You've done well. Has anyone seen them?"

"I was discreet."

"Thank you, Achelys. You may go."

Linden opened the door, both dreading and hoping that this would mean Mephistis: Dreading because he was the last person she wished to find in her home on the eve of a party to which mages and priests had been invited, and hoping because it could only mean he had escaped the Regent's and the Saer'ajan's sweeps. Half the realm was searching for Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan and the other half was busily butchering all of his fleeing followers that they could overtake.

She shut the door, locking it the moment she entered. One, and only one, she recognized immediately. Linden grabbed Mephistis, holding him tightly. "Mephistis!

Oh thank Hell you're safe." Like most Sharani, Linden was dark, broad through the shoulders and narrow waisted, with large eyes and strong cheekbones – handsome rather than pretty.

"I'm glad to see you too, Linden," Mephistis allowed a thin smile to emerge. He had known Linden most of his life: she and his ma'aram had been close in private, but carefully distant in public – a caution which had allowed Linden to survive the defeat of Aevrina's coup. The son had attempted to replicate it on a larger scale, using his ma'aram's surviving network.

Linden turned from him to examine the others with a critical eye: having secrets to hide, she did not like finding uninvited strangers in her home. "Who are these folk?"

"Allow me to introduce Bodramet, my most trusted lieutenant."

Bodramet gave her a courtly bow. Linden appreciated the look of him, wondering just how interesting it might be to play nibble games with him.

"The other you know."

"I do?" She walked closer to the woman who appeared dazed, disoriented somehow, like one newly undead. Linden's brow furrowed as she thought. "Can it be?"

"Yes."

"They say she's dead. Oh." Being a banewitch, rather than a necromancer, she sometimes missed the nuances of undeath; knew that she did so; and felt startled for a moment that she had recognized them. She turned to Margren. "Are you hungry, dear?"

Margren nodded.

Linden looked to Mephistis. "Can you make it a quiet dinner? No dark magics. I have priests and mages coming to the party. Tomorrow I can cater to your more exotic tastes. This house is well shielded."

"Yes. I understand."

"Did you bring much?"

"It is all on the horses. Your servant stabled them."

"I'll have your things brought. Come." She led them through the manor and across the garden to a large guesthouse. "Pick any room you wish, only make certain no one sees Margren outside this guesthouse. She's too well known. People know she's dead. In case you haven't heard, all the Rowans are." The extinguishment of one of

Shaurone's noblest families was lending a great deal of impetus to the chase, making this a very dangerous time, indeed. If she could have safely turned them away, she would have.

Then she showed them the bookcase that slid aside to reveal a stair. They went down and found themselves in an oddly comfortable dungeon. The twenty cells looked like dorm rooms with beds and chests. The occupants, mostly women, looked healthy and well cared for. Linden took a ring of keys down, placing it in Mephistis' hands. "You may each have one. Feed quietly. No mortgiefan."

"My word on it," Mephistis said. He hugged her again; his fangs lengthened and pricked her neck.

She slapped him. "None of that!" Then she smiled. "At least not tonight. We can play nibble games tomorrow. You will find pleasant dining rooms at the end."

Linden left, striding swiftly back into the mansion in search of her other questionable guest, though his face and nature were known to very few in Shaurone, his name was known to many. She found him in an upstairs study, visiting with her na'halaef, Quellyn. He stood when she entered, executing a small, precise bow. Lord Hoon was tall and sleek with dark, finely drawn features. Like many ancient vampires, the sun no longer held danger for him – although Linden suspected that this was not so much a matter of his age as of his lineage, one of those called royals among the vampire clans. Which one she did not know, but he had known her family for generations. "Lord Hoon, I must ask a favor. I have acquired three other guests. One of them is Mephistis. I need to get my daughter, Tomyrilen, out of the house at once. Can one of your people take her somewhere safe until they are gone?"

"As ever, I am at your service, Linden. Bring my godchild to me and I will see that she is not discovered by her half-brother." His speech patterns made people squirm: each and every word precisely pronounced, sentences more suited to an old dry book than living speech.

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Mephistis walked beside Margren. "Which one do you want?"

Margren rubbed against him, her eyes coy, and her movements like a wheedling child. "Want two."

"No. Lord Linden said one each. There must be some left for tomorrow. You must feed again."

Margren pointed to a small female. "That one."

Mephistis opened the cell and went in. The woman smiled happily, extending her hand to him. He led her out. Margren bounced on the balls of her feet, mouth open,

fangs extended. She reached for the woman. Mephistis knocked her hands away. "Not yet."

Margren pouted, trailing after them into the feeding room. Mephistis closed the door, checking that it was secure, feeling along the edges interestedly. The door seal was so tight that it must have been made to hold in the screams so as not to alarm the other captives. There was a bed in the far corner, a long couch, and a bleeding-table with deep blood grooves and spouts with basins poised beneath them.

"How do you want her?" A soft thud made him turn. Margren had the woman on the floor, her fangs deep in the carotid artery, sucking noisily. The woman showed no sign of pain, still smiling. Only in that last moment before death did she scream. He knew then that Linden kept them either spelled or drugged. *Quiet meal indeed* .

Mephistis left Margren to it. He found Bodramet prowling hungrily up and down, staring into the cells. "Which one?"

Bodramet chose, nodding to the cell.

Mephistis opened it and walked on. "Use the other dining room. Margren might still try to eat you." Mephistis did not like his food so quiet, it robbed him of the intensity of feeding. He wanted mortgiefan desperately to ease the burning in his nerves, the muscles that had started to crawl under his skin, the constant edge of nausea. But he had given Linden his word and would keep it. If he gave in to his desires... If these rooms were discovered Linden and her entire family would be executed.

He rejoined Margren with his meal. Margren had finished with the blood and started on the entrails. Mephistis' meal mouthed a scream that caught in her throat and refused to emerge. She turned eyes wide with terror to Mephistis, reaching for the doorknob. Mephistis' hand covered hers. She pulled free, retreating toward the blood-table. Mephistis sighed: if he took her there it would be impossible to control himself, the table had been designed for mortgiefan. Mephistis reached into her mind, caught her. She came to him. He released her mind as he took her down. The screaming started. He pinned her body with his, enjoying the way she writhed beneath him. He bit into her breast, hit the vein, and began to drink. The woman wept, pleaded, and then fell silent. His need for food was sated, but his other hunger still gnawed at his gut.

He felt Margren lean over his shoulder, looked up into her face smeared with blood and offal. She wanted the rest of his meal. Mephistis smiled: she would have to pay for it. He removed her clothes, tossing them to the far side of the room, and then he pushed against her shoulders to make her lie down. Margren cooperated. Mephistis opened his pants, taking his member out. Sex was a poor substitute for mortgiefan when the hunger was on him, but it would have to do. He shoved into her without

preliminaries, driven by his need and came almost as soon as he entered. Margren wiggled from under him and began eating the second woman.

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Margren hid from the sunlight beneath the blankets of their bed. She did not need to, being necari, not vampire; the sun might bother her, but it could not harm her any more than it could a zombie. Mephistis found clothing laid out for him on the narrow couch in the antechamber. The simple black tunic and trousers fit nicely. Someone had polished his boots and left them beside the couch. He pulled them on, crossed to the long mirror, and turned about appreciating himself.

"Ahhhh!" a familiar, approving voice said. "It is so good to see you well, your highness."

Lord Hoon stood in the doorway. "Our host says you can now be free to feed as you please."

"Mortgiefan?"

"Certainly. If there is any way in which I can assist, your highness? When do you intend to begin?"

"Mid afternoon. Margren gets difficult to control at night. I don't know what happened – at Castle Rowan."

"May I sit, Your Highness?"

"Of course." Mephistis joined him on the couch.

"This is what is known. Josiah Abelard is abroad once more– He is, they say, in love with Aejoystrys Rowan. That he stole her body and ran off to Vorgensburg."

"Aejoystrys Rowan is alive." Abelard. That was who hit them at Dragonshead. The mage-master was back. Mephistis felt chilled to the core of his being. If even half the legends were true, Abelard could seriously rival Mephistis' power and his knowledge.

"Alive? Many, many people saw her dead body, attest to it. Including Sonden, an unimpeachable source."

"She is alive. Mortgiefan. I nearly had it. We are linked through that. When I take another she feels it. The muscles crawl under my skin, my nerves and skin burn. My loins ache even when they have been..."

"My prince, this is called deijanrael, stolen death."

"It has a name?" Mephistis leaned back against the couch, surprised. As many times as he and the other younger sa'necari had spoken of it, speculated about it, none had been able to set a name to it.

"My prince, for all your power – and you may well be the most powerful sa'necari we have ever produced – there is still much knowledge you do not have. Power without knowledge cannot reach its full potential. It is like using a battering ram when one requires a rapier. A delicate touch. A quick thrust.

"Furthermore, deijanrael can have very serious side-effects on sa'necari. When I was young, not yet undead, a group of sa'necari youngsters thought it grand to rob one another in the very act of mortgiefan. A very powerful young mon had managed to capture a handsome Valdren mage. In the last moments of mortgiefan the band descended on him, stole his victim – keeping him alive with a stasis spell long enough for one of them to take him instead. The first young mon withered and died within weeks. The greater the death, my prince, the greater the damage from deijanrael."

Mephistis regarded the ancient vampire; no one knew how old he was or of which lineage – even the lesser bloods eventually emerged from their initial animalistic state – yet Mephistis felt certain that Hoon was of the royals, not the lesser bloods. They speculated, but no one really knew and Hoon would never tell. He ran his life, lands and castle on a strictly need to know basis, rarely volunteering anything. "Will you help me?"

The vampire smiled, his long teeth showing. "Of course. You want to kill her through the link? Take what is rightfully yours?"

"Yes. So what do you suggest?"

"Mirrors. Several long mirrors – like this one set in front of the blood-table."

"Mirrors?"

"I will work the mirrors so that we can see to fight if Abelard should intervene."

"Yes." Mephistis grew excited.

"I will meet you the second hour past noon in the south dining chamber. The one you fed in last night. And it might interest you... Linden has a special captive that she has been holding back on consuming. A noble's only child."

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Linden woke late, opening her eyes to the nearly afternoon sun. Her na'halaef, Quellyn lay beside her. Although both of them were only in their early twenties, they already had three children. Linden and Quellyn had handfasted at fifteen, but they

had been lovers since age ten. Like many races beset by savage forces, the Sharani achieved sexual maturity young and had an easy-going attitude toward precocious sexual exploration among their children – something they could afford since the magical energy called the kyndi protected them from pregnancy before their bodies were mature enough to handle it. Linden could not imagine life without Quellyn and it made her very protective.

"What's this about more guests?" Quellyn asked, rolling onto her side.

"Stay away from them!" Linden realized she had said that with more force than she intended. "Give me a day with them to assess things, feel it out. Mephistis may well be the most dangerous sa'necari alive."

"You're not saying that simply because the whole realm is looking for him?"

"No. No one knows which of the Waejonans holds the Legacy of Waejonan. It has to be either King Baaltrystan or Mephistis. I suspect the latter."

"Dangerous indeed."

Linden went to the closet, pulling on a dark tunic and pants. "I'm going to the guesthouse. Stay here."

She found Bodramet in an upstairs study. He turned from pulling a book from the shelf to face her, smiling. His fangs were extended and he ran his tongue across them to emphasize their readiness. There was an intense darkness to that one, power oozed from every pore of his psychic being and resonated with her own. Linden knew she would be playing a decidedly dangerous game even getting close to him. Yet Mephistis was still more dangerous than this one.

"Do you play nibble games with common sa'necari?" he laid the book on the desk, crossing to touch her face. "Or do you, like some I know, have a taste only for princes?"

"You're scarcely common, Bodramet. Your father, I hear, is Lord Jibade."

"He is."

"Or do you mean like Margren?" Linden let her own fangs descend.

"No, like Isranon. You've never met him or you'd know." Bodramet tilted his head, touching her fangs just enough to break the skin on his finger and rubbed the blood across her tongue. "Banewitch?"

Linden sucked his finger. Sa'necari blood was heady, making her want more. "Yes."

Bodramet nuzzled her neck. "Nibble games?"

"Not where it shows." Linden opened her shirt. "Mine don't go away as quickly as yours."

"Then you should have chosen our path," Bodramet said, settling cross-legged and dragging her to the floor beside him. "You have no fear of the dark, unlike the half-a-mon my prince sent north." He pressed his face between her breasts, licking his way to the artery. As Bodramet's fangs broke the skin, she bit him on the shoulder where the artery descending from his neck described a turn along the top.

The blood tasted intense and rich; had this not been a waystation for the upper echelons, Linden would have killed one or more of them, draining them for the bottles. The sa'necari murdered, dueled, and fed upon each other as much for the delicious taste of their blood, enhanced by a thousand varied rites, as for power – some gained power just from the blood alone.

Linden felt certain Bodramet would be more open with her after this sharing, that she would get more information from him about what had happened at Dragonshead. Frequently this was the case. Linden was a banewitch as her sire and ma'aram had been, working in death and blood, but not necromantic. It was the absence of necromancy that most distinguished the arts of the banewitch from those of the sa'necari. They did not make revenants, zombies, and skeleton warriors. They simply wove spells of death and fed upon it.

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Mephistis left Hoon and headed for the downstairs study where he had last seen Bodramet. He wanted the younger sa'necari to stay away while they held the rite, and also wished to ask Linden about this special captive. Hoon's description made Mephistis' throat itch and his loins tighten. He found Linden and Bodramet in the downstairs study playing nibble games with their shirts off; neither of them wanting obvious scars. Both of them had blood on their faces and a startled, embarrassed look when Mephistis surprised them. He knew that Linden and her parents had been banewitches.

"Nibble games and I've not been invited?" Mephistis settled into a chair. "Bodramet, find something else to do for a few hours. I don't wish you present at it. I intend a major rite of mortgiefan in the second hour past noon. I require mirrors. Enough to cover a wall. Remove the couch and bed from the south dining chamber. Center the bleeding-table, but keep the head toward the mirrors. Beyond that the usual candles and incense. Hoon tells me you have a special prisoner, a noble's heir."

"My, my." She said, buttoning her shirt just enough to cover her nipples, but left the substantial curve of her breasts showing. "Hoon has been talking."

Bodramet rose, excused himself with a bow, and went out.

They both knew Hoon was involved the moment Mephistis mentioned the mirrors. Very few sa'necari and vampires used them: Mirror magic was a nearly lost art except among the dark ones. Only the Fae, one of the sylvan races, were true masters of the mirrors.

"Do you have her?" Mephistis demanded, growing impatient. He was in no mood for games and would just as soon beat her bloody as look at her.

"Yes. I had planned to do her myself. Her ma'aram is a thorn in my side, contests every proposal I make in council. Now she's too busy searching for her missing heir to even attend."

"Ha'taren?"

"Yes."

"I want her. She's perfect." Mephistis rose from his chair and extended his hand palm down.

Linden visibly winced. Every line of her stance suggested her intense dislike of making a gesture of obeisance; especially since it entailed giving up something she did not wish to.

"Now!" Mephistis said. He disliked defiance, it made him uneasy. He suspected she would try to substitute another in place of the one he had asked for. That would be completely unacceptable. Linden existed to aid, succor, and cooperate with any and all sa'necari who came slipping through Shaurone. He would not have her defy him even in her most private thoughts.

She dropped to one knee before him, taking his hand. "In this life and in the next, by every turn of the wheel, I am yours to command for all eternity." Then she kissed his hand and rose.

"Have her there by the second hour past noon."

"As you wish, my prince." Her tone was casual, yet guarded. She warded her mind.

Mephistis sensed deception in her manner, felt it when she shielded her mind from him. His eyes narrowed and he seized Linden by the throat as she started to pass him, slamming her into the wall. The impact knocked the air from her lungs. Her eyes bulged. The sa'necari prince threw her to the floor, dropping his knees onto the side of her head and pinning her. If she moved the least bit he would break her neck. "You will give her to me. You will obey me. Deceive me and I will take your na'halaef instead."

"Yes. Yes. She's yours. I swear it."

Mephistis savored the taste of terror rising from her as he ripped her shirt open, fondling her breasts. He would teach her a lesson she would never forget. Banewitches did not rise undead as the sa'necari did. He tore the sword belt from her waist as if it were tissue paper, casting it far from her reach. He bent over her, sinking his fangs deep into the large blue vein in her breast barely an inch from where Bodramet had fed. Linden moaned. He rolled her over on her back, straddling her.

Mephistis sensed the change when she began to mistake this for a rough nibble game, a token act of dominance. She rubbed against him as he moved to another vein when that one collapsed. Her guard dropped and then it was too late. Mephistis lunged into her mind, took her completely to the smallest cells of her brain, and made her his creature. He could have taken her mind at any point, but he had not wanted to tear it to shreds getting there. He wanted her as intact as possible. Otherwise she would have been of no use to him. She would still have free will, but not when such conflicted with his desires. He probed deeper and found that part of her mind and memories was warded by a power that rivaled his own. That troubled him. A sa'necari had been here before him and set wards. Which one? Why? His sire had led the occupation force when the Waejontori held Danae for a few years. Could it have been him? Or one of his lieutenants? Mephistis moved around them, pressing cautiously for an opening he could not find. Then he simply gave it up. The strength it would take to break them might destroy Linden.

Linden realized instantly what he had been done to her, but would never be able to tell anyone. For the first time in her adult life she was frightened. She tried to pull away, praying that he would let her go. He drank in her fear.

"Foolish little knight," Mephistis said. "I'm not done with you yet." He opened his pants, lifted himself out, and slit the crotch of her trousers with his belt knife, then pushed into her. He could beat her to death and she would simply lie down and let him do it. Mephistis did not intend to go that far, nothing that would not mend but much that would. He felt her delicate tissues tear as his thrusts turned savage. He cut away a piece of her shirt, balled it up, and shoved it in her mouth. Then he began to strike her in the stomach and chest without missing a beat as his cock slid in and out of her. Blood coated his member, ran down her thighs, and pooled beneath her buttocks. A feeding or ten would heal much of the damage, but she would hurt a very long time. He pulled his blade and began to systematically slice her.

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Everything was as he wanted it when Mephistis entered the south dining chamber. The remains of last night's dinner had been removed. Hoon leaned against the wall near the foot of the bleeding-table. The noble's heir lay chained to the table, nude. She had a fine strong body that reminded him vaguely of Aejs, but without the scars. She was barely eighteen, and when Mephistis learned her identity, Linden's audacity startled him: The young ha'taren was Meredouyn Dovane, only child and heir of Anaria Dovane, Regent of Danae on behalf of Reynan Dovane, daughter of

the exiled Tomyris the Lionhawk. Mephistis could hardly believe his luck. *An impressive catch – no wonder Linden had tried to keep the young woman for herself.*

"Only Reynan, herself, would have pleased me more," Mephistis remarked. "The child must be about eleven by now."

Reynan's ma'aram had masterminded the conquest of most of Waejontor – but not even Mephistis' best agents and most powerful arts had been able to uncover where Anaria had hidden the child. Once he finished with Aejs Rowan, Mephistis intended to find Reynan and kill her. The lineage of Danae would soon end, just as Rowan would.

"I have never been able to find her," Linden answered. "You are setting this up different than any rite of mortgiefan I have seen."

"Aejs Rowan is alive. I was interrupted in mid-rite, we are linked. Josiah Abelard is abroad once more. He called her back from death. I intend to kill her through the link, but I may have to fight Abelard to achieve it."

Linden stood at the farthest side of the chamber where the bed had been, dressed to hide her bruises and wounds. She held a brazier already billowing with fragrant smoke. Mephistis placed the empty hilt of the Blade of Nine Souls between the victim's breasts. Then he disrobed. Hoon came forward, drawing arcane symbols on Mephistis' body in black paint mixed with sacred oils. He placed an obsidian blade in Mephistis' hand and withdrew to lean against the wall again. Linden circled the prince and the bleeding-table intoning, her stride faltering and limping.

Mephistis caressed Meredouyn's body with the blade, drawing a hot glance from her: as instructed the woman was fully aware, Linden had neither drugged nor spelled her. Mephistis contemplated the woman's body, focusing, remembering each place where Margren had shoved the blade into Aejs, wanting to repeat it as closely as he could.

The vampire moved to his side. "Whatever happens, you must complete the mortgiefan. I will stand at your side, put my hand on your shoulder. Should we encounter resistance, I will initiate rapport and draw on your strength to fight them through the eye of the mirrors."

"As you wish," Mephistis replied, without raising his eyes from the woman's body.

Linden slit the ha'taren's wrists and ankles, which were positioned to drain into the basins. Other wounds would drain into the grooves on the table itself. Mephistis mounted the woman.

A gesture from Hoon filled the mirrors with light and then images. Some speculated that Fae blood ran in Hoon's ancestry and Linden could believe it, seeing this. Hoon

had far more talents and abilities than he allowed to become known.

The link flared between Mephistis and Aejs, appearing as a multitude of black tentacles of power and hunger that leaped through the mirrors. Mephistis shoved the blade into the woman's stomach four times. He watched Aejs fall against her chair and the chair overturn, dumping her on the floor. Mephistis kept his rhythm steady. Hoon's hand dropped to his shoulder, initiating rapport. A small nerien knelt by Aejs, reading her. Another woman dived under the table and balled up. Then a huge triton stood over Aejs and battle was joined. Mephistis looked away from the mirrors as he sensed the sea-mage's magic rise against him. He had to let Hoon fight the battle since he did not have the mirror gift and dared not split his attentions.

Mephistis slid the blade into the woman's right shoulder, jerking it down through her until he slit the nipple. He shoved the blade into the woman's left breast an inch from her heart and left it there. Meredouyn screamed, writhing beneath him. Now he had come again to the moment before Aejs' ma'aram had put that blade in his side. He felt the pressure building in his loins, ready to erupt. He put one hand on the empty hilt that had once held the Blade of Nine Souls and the other on the hilt of the blade in his victim's breast. He twisted it into her heart. The woman died. Her soul shattered and Mephistis sucked up pieces as he erupted within Meredouyn, but only hers: His connection with Aejs had slipped free before he could take hers also.

"What in Hell's name, happened?" Mephistis demanded, wondering as he did if perhaps he should have first spent several days repeating the stages of torture to which Margren had subjected her sister. Perhaps everything had to match.

Linden was pale and trembling; Hoon, thoughtful. "She has two mages. A sea-mage and Abelard. Do you still have agents in Vorgensburg?"

"Yes. A sa'necari."

"You should take out her mages, and then we will either do this again or something stronger." Hoon smiled, his lips thinning to nothing. "Now, if you will excuse me, my prince, watching you has given me an appetite."

Mephistis turned to Linden. "There are preserving bottles in the saddlebags in my rooms. You will see that they are filled. I assume this paladin's blood to be reasonably potent. If there is anything left of it when my bottles are replenished, you may have it."

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"I apologize, dear Linden," Hoon said, sitting with one ankle propped atop his other knee, "for betraying your catch to the prince, but he needed one who was as close to Aejs as he could get. I should have warned you, but there was no time."

They sat in Linden's study in the manor, a close, dark paneled room with many

books along the walls.

Linden did not answer. She cast her eyes downward in uncomfortable silence, refusing to look at him.

"Mephistis suffers from deijanrael, stolen death, and I am the only one with the art to keep him alive. He must have Rowan's death or a greater one for his healing. I promised him this."

Still Linden did not answer. She drew in upon herself, her eyes half-closed as she struggled to deal with the terror of Mephistis' bindings within the fiber of her being.

"Is there something wrong?"

"A nibble game got too rough." Her voice was husky with strain, her mouth tightening.

Hoon raised one elegant eyebrow. "With which of our sa'necari?"

Linden wished desperately she could have told him the whole of it, but Mephistis' coercions were firm and would tear her mind to speak the words. "Mephistis," was all she could say.

"I am sorry." Hoon rose, reaching for her and she winced away lest he try to Read her. All vampires had that gift as it deepened their feedings. So did the sa'necari.

Realization swept across the ancient vampire's face. Hoon's eyes narrowed dangerously. "He bound your mind."

Linden rose, walking away from him without a word. She heard Hoon smash something in the study, but did not look back – she was hearing his anger at Mephistis. She suppressed a feeling of triumph, not knowing how far Mephistis' coercions extended. If there existed a match for the power of the Legacy of Waejonan, it had to be Lord Hoon.

\* \* \* \*

Mephistis brooded about Linden. The wards he had found in her mind – could something hidden there be strong enough or directed in such a way that his hold on her could be broken. He did not want to chance that. He required a second means of controlling her, of insuring her obedience. The knight was a pivotal part in the movement of Waejontori agents in and out of Shaurone. If he hoped to rebuild his damaged network, it would depend on controlling Linden and her entire household. He summoned her, telling her to bring her na'halaef to him. Quellyn was tall and broad-shouldered, an excellent example of Sharani genetics. She stared at Mephistis questioningly. "What is this about?"

"Linden has told me much about you – I thought perhaps to include you in our nibble games."

Linden grinned. "Sounds fine to me. What do you say, Quellyn?"

Her stomach tightened, she knew that Mephistis was covering all possibilities, but she wanted to weep when she realized he meant to take Quellyn too. Mephistis was the only sa'necari prince she had ever knowingly encountered. She had always been told that if she met one she should give him whatever he wanted, withholding nothing; now she knew why. There had been another sa'necari prince, but she had not known who and what he was until far later. They had fallen in love. He placed the wards in her mind to protect their child, to conceal the knowledge of her. He was the one who warned her about other princes like himself. He was long dead, but the wards remained. Linden's only comfort in that moment was that if Mephistis destroyed both her and Quellyn, their sa'necari child would surely destroy him. Hoon knew about her daughter, including the name of her sire: Linden thanked the fates that Hoon took his role as godparent seriously enough that he would never reveal the child's existence to Mephistis or anyone else.

Quellyn shrugged and disrobed. "Could be fun."

Mephistis slipped out of his clothing.

Quellyn grinned, eyeing his tight, slender body. "Yes, indeed."

Mephistis cupped her breasts, working them with his thumbs.

"Come on, Linden. Get naked," Quellyn yelled, and then moaned as Mephistis found all the right spots.

"I just want to watch," Linden said, unable to entirely suppress an odd catch in her throat.

Mephistis smiled at Quellyn, his fangs extended.

"I've never been bitten before – except by Linden." Quellyn glanced at Linden, one eyebrow quirked. Something was wrong, but she could not say what. But it could not be bad or Linden would have said something.

"Then you'll like this." Mephistis' head reared back like a viper, then struck, taking her in the throat and mind simultaneously. She collapsed against him. Linden screamed. He drank, and then laid Quellyn down gently. Linden scrambled over to them, grabbing at Quellyn. Mephistis pushed her away.

"I didn't kill her." He said. "However. Should I ever feel your binding break – or hers – mortgiefan. I have laid a link in her mind and body. I can kill her through it like that!" He snapped his fingers. To complete the lesson, he began to beat and cut

Quellyn. Then he took them each in turn.

\* \* \* \*

Margren crouched on the stairs, hidden by the balusters, her eyes glowing crimson with her rage. The rags of the dress Mephistis had insisted she wear hung about her lean body. She had shredded it with her claws the minute he left the room. The more her intellect returned, the more she began to shrug off the initial bindings he had placed upon her. What held a revenant could not hold a necari. She listened to Mephistis grunting as he rutted with his two new lemans. She hated them. Mephistis had banished her from his bed after she tried to rip Linden's throat out. Oh, he still said he loved her, but Margren questioned that now that she was no longer a living woman and could not give him a child.

Perhaps she hated him too. A noise from the other end of the hallway made her tilt her head like a listening dog and she scuttled down the stairs, hunched over, her fingers brushing the floor as she moved. Mephistis had never been loyal to her. First there had been Isranon, that gutless half-a-mon, and now there were these two. Margren reached the common sitting room at the room and hid herself behind a chair, waiting in the darkness. There were very few people in guesthouse at night, other than the meals in the dungeon. She was hungry again. Rage made her hungry. Mephistis would punish her if she went down to the dungeon and took another one. She did not want blood from the bottles; she wanted it pulsing in the veins with the taste of their terror. Yes, that was the best way to feed.

Margren imagined sinking her fangs into Mephistis' throat and tearing it out, tasting the warm, rich blood as it fountained into her mouth. That would teach him. Then she sensed a sweep of necromantic awareness brush across her with a hint of magery – Hoon's signature. The ancient vampire had been a mage of great power, not a sa'necari, before his turning. His aura tasted different from those she had known at Mephistis' citadel beneath Dragonshead. She huddled down more and stilled her thoughts. Hoon's footsteps started back to his rooms. Margren moved swiftly before he could notice her psychic scent again, darting to the door and out.

Linden and Quellyn had children. She knew that from bits of overheard conversations in the guesthouse. Margren crept into the bushes of the garden, crawling along the edge of the hedgerows. *Children. Delicious. Children*. Footsteps again made her pause and fade back into the shadows by flattening beneath the hedges. The guard stopped, listening for a moment and then went on.

Margren found the windows along the stone building and climbed the ledges, scrabbling for hand and footholds between the blocks of masonry. She stopped from time to time, listening, as she made her way like a lizard up the side. Sniffing, she caught the smell of children's bodies, so similar and yet different from Linden and Quellyn's. Pausing at their window, Margren listened again and then opened it silently. Two small girls lay asleep together in a large bed. Margren stared down at them, her

fangs descending to fullness. Necari fangs were not the delicate things that sa'necari had, but savage ones like a beast, rivaling the greater vampiric lineages – not needles, but daggers – which was why so many of the undead left scars of their feedings, while the sa'necari rarely did unless they chose to.

She slipped her mind, an easy thrust, into the first sleeping child and drew the girl to her breast. Margren fondled her head a moment, savoring the scent of her, and then bent to nuzzle her throat.

"No, Margren. You may not have the child," said a severe voice and a powerful hand clamped onto her neck. "I am their guardian."

Margren snarled wordlessly, straining to pull forward and sink her fangs in despite the grip upon her.

"I said no!"

Power slammed through Margren's head like a hammer to her temples and she cringed, blinking in pain. Strong hands took the child and returned her to the bed. Then Lord Hoon turned Margren about and looked down at her.

"When I tell you to obey, you will obey. Is that understood?"

"Yes," Margren hissed.

Hoon released her. "Come with me before someone sees you."

He took her to the window and, instead of climbing down as she had come up, he floated them to the garden below. "You knew not to come here, Margren."

"He's playing rod in the hole with them," Margren snarled.

"So this is as much about vengeance as about appetite? How interesting." Hoon's long fingered hand stroked Margren's hair as he walked her back to the guesthouse. "Are you hungry, lovely Margren?"

"Yes," Margren said in a wheedling voice and rubbed against him.

Hoon's laugh was like silk with a blade concealed beneath it. "Then I will see that you are fed. Mephistis has been neglecting you, but I shall not."

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **DEADLY CONNECTIONS**

Solstice, the day that Shaurone would have fallen had Margren's plot not been

stopped, arrived two weeks after Aeijys came home. Aeijys spent more and more time sitting up. Her splinted hands were an aggravation: she could not hold a book or even turn the pages; she needed help to fill and light her pipe; she could not feed herself. Becca got creative, trying to keep the paladin from becoming too bored and restive, and sent up first the household's children who were just learning to read, thanks to the good offices of Tagalong Smith and Cassana Odaren who had provided the funds to hire a teacher before leaving with Aeijys last summer; later Becca collared all the members of the household who could play or sing, sending them up to Aeijys; finally she traded a snowbound minstrel lodging and meals to entertain her lord.

That afternoon, Aeijys called a council. There had been no further altercations between her people and those of Thomas Cedarbird, but she felt certain that as soon as the winter storms no longer held the ships to harbor and trade routes thawed out trouble would come. There had also been no word from the other syndics and guild-masters concerning her offer, some called it a demand, clearly they were also waiting for spring. Aeijys decided then to call their bluffs early, if bluffs they were, and withdraw her protection from Vorgensburg. If the freebooters out of Brunstrat came raiding in the spring she would not stop them, she would simply move her people to safer ground.

Taun and Skree sat to her left, Josh and Becca to her right around the table in the parlor. It was a far different gathering from the last time she had called a council and she could not suppress a wave of loneliness thinking of the absent faces, wondering how they fared: Tagalong, Clemmerick, Tamlestari and Grymlyken were still in Shaurone; Cassana was buried on the grounds of the Willodarian Monastery of St. Tarmus.

"I have always toyed with the idea of founding my own city, my own state. There is more than enough room in these wildernesses. So I have decided to do it."

"You should stay on the bay," Skree said. "You will need harbor for your ships."

"Perhaps the south talon," Aeijys suggested.

"There is a place along the eastern tip of the south talon's rainshadow," Taun put in, his eyes bright and shining. "It would be perfect."

Aeijys smiled at the enthusiasm of the young healer. The swelling had gone from her face, the bruises faded to gray-green splotches, the large cuts – one on her right cheek and the other a long gash along the left side of her face from just below her eye to her jawline – were turning into pink scars beneath the scabbing. Like most Sharani, she had always been a handsome, rather than a pretty woman, but that was gone now. Taun had done what he could for it. Aeijys did not think about those things: Sharani put less stock in personal beauty out of necessity, since their women were warriors.

"I don't know," Becca began uncertainly. "The Cock and Boar..."

"I'm not taking away your tavern, Becca. I will be keeping about half of my holdings here, including the Cock and Boar. As long as you can handle Cedarbird. But if things get ugly here, then you will just have to let me build you a new tavern in Rowanhart."

Becca grinned then, brushing her knuckles across her chin. "Wuss bait. Just leave me Clemmerick when he comes home."

"Becca, you can have him. He'll be hard to replace, but you can keep him. You'll be in charge of all my holdings here, but I'll need someone to handle the details for me in Rowanhart. There are three things that Cedarbird can try: one, to steal my fledgling trade contacts; two to pressure the other syndics to stop doing business with me; third to physically damage my holdings or members of my household. If it comes to the last, then you will have to move, Becca. That's it. Period. End of story."

Becca snorted, then grinned at Aejys for using Tagalong's pet phrases. "You give me full freedom to act and I'll make mince of Cedarbird."

"The Neridian Isles have not traded with Landsmyn in twenty years. I could see if any would be willing to set up a trading post with your new city," Skree volunteered, earning him an odd, questioning glance from Taun. "The way that Branch works with you in that Kwaklahmyn post of his."

"We would all benefit from that," Taun said. "There are many things from the deep seas that landsmyn have no access to. Just as there are many things, especially herbs, that our people cannot grow on the islands."

"Just so, little seal. And, Aejys, I can get a boat across the bay in even the worst weather. We could have your city marked out and started long before the spring thaw. By the time any of Cedarbird's people notice what is happening your city would already be a fact."

"We have a lot of people living in winter quarters who would appreciate having something to do" Becca chimed in.

"Good. Becca, get me some architects and I think that about does it. Have Omer and Raim get a crew together. We can get the settlement star—" Aejys broke off abruptly, doubling over in sharp pain as if someone had just shoved a blade into her stomach. Dark magics seared through her and she felt the sa'necari slide into her, his body moving on hers as he took mortgiefan. She stiffened, falling back in her chair, which over turned. Her eyes rolled up in her head and she writhed on the ground in the harsh grip of a seizure.

Everyone came to their feet in a rush. "What's wrong with her?" Becca cried.

Taun reached her first, gripping her wrist and Reading her quickly. "I don't know." He sounded frightened.

Skree sniffed the air, snarling. "Sa'necari!" His lips drew back, revealing the long, shark-like teeth as rage suffused his face, narrowing his eyes. He thrust his arms skyward with a shouted word of command. The roaring of the sea surrounded them. The sharp tang of ocean air filled the room. He sketched the Rune of Nerindalori in blue-green energy that hung in the air before him, forcing the dark power to reveal itself: Black tendrils of sa'necari magic could now be seen oozing through every opening in the room, between the cracks in the shutters, the small places between the boards along the outside walls. A single tendril split into four appendages each one sunk deep into Aejs' body: Into her left breast inches from her heart; right shoulder; stomach and groin.

"Taun!" Skree drew his athame from his belt, tossing the blade to the nerien healer. Taun caught it. The undulate blade was tinted sea green with the Rune of Nerindalori etched just beneath the crosspiece. The hilt and crosspiece were set with ritually charged stones: Taun slashed the tendril embedded in Aejs. It released her, recoiling from the sacred blade's touch. Aejs went abruptly still, wet red stains erupting, spreading across her pale tunic.

"No, no, no!" Taun snatched his medicine satchel from beneath the table. He pulled out bandages and opened her tunic. The shoulder and breast wounds had re-opened completely, but the bleeding stomach wounds were shallow, looking worse than they actually were: Taun suspected that lifemage work was not so easily undone as his own.

Becca screamed, diving under the table. A sea-green glow began as a halo above Skree's head, spread over his body and then outward, shoving at the dark magics. The room seemed to tilt and spin. Becca balled up, covering her head with her arms, terrified of what she could not fight.

Josh knocked over his chair, tumbling to the floor. He turned over, scrambling toward the liquor cabinet on hands and knees. A tendril curled around his ankle, jerking him down hard, his face striking the floor.

Skree's face tightened and twisted with effort, moisture trickled down his face, oozing out between his scales. He cried out in the high-pitched whistling tongue of the sea-folk as his power touched the tendrils.

Taun pulled out the flask of whiskey, which he had taken from Josh days earlier, "Josh! Heads up!"

Josh sat and turned as Taun tossed the metal flask. The sailor caught it easily, ripped it open, and gulped the burning liquor. Power rose in him, unleashed. For the first time memories of another life flooded into him and he became fully Josiah

Abelard. Josiah crisped the tendril gripping him with a finger of blue fire. If he struck and shielded independently in a room this small, his magic might disrupt the sea-mage in a possibly dangerous manner, better to simply feed power to him. He twisted and lunged toward Skree as a tendril pierced the sea-mage's glowing shields. The tendril struck Skree hard between the shoulder blades, staggering him. The glow wavered. Instantly all the tendrils lunged for Aejs.

Josiah came to his feet beside Skree, catching and steadying him before he could fall. The sot slid his hand into Skree's and fed his power to the sea-mage. Skree's eyes widened in a brief moment of shock and surprise, then he drew on it. The glow steadied, extended itself again, darkening to a deep blue-green. Each tendril touched by the glow turned to ash. The glow shoved outward swiftly, filling the room and sealing the cracks. The tilting stopped. The darkness fled. Josiah released Skree's hand.

Skree dropped to his knees trembling with exhaustion and reaction. Aejs lay quiet beside him, eyes closed, breathing hard, her heart racing. Taun quickly checked Aejs again, finding her weak but stable, then he wrapped his arms around Skree linking with him in rapport.

"What the hell was that?" Becca demanded, emerging from under the table. Becca slid an arm around Aejs, lifting her. Taun released Skree and went to help her. Together they moved Aejs to the bed.

Skree turned to Josiah. "You have filled my head with questions, landsmon. First, how is it that a sa'necari has a magic link to Aejs Rowan that allows him to attack her? Tell me how this is possible!"

"Mortgiefan," Josiah replied, visibly shaken. "When we reached her we interrupted a sa'necari taking it from her."

"And you did not kill him?" Skree demanded.

"He was mortally wounded, but escaped..."

"Healed by blood, no doubt. They are linked. The paladin and the sa'necari. Each time he takes mortgiefan from another she feels herself die with that one. Eventually he will kill her with these attacks and take the mortgiefan from her through the link." Skree understood now why he had smelled sa'necari and mortgiefan in her room that day when Taun and Josh quarreled over the bottle, why she had gone into a seizure that nearly killed her.

Josiah's face twisted up in shock and horror as he fought to hold himself in check. He had detested the sa'necari so intensely last time around that he had refused to closely study their methods and patterns, which was ultimately how he had fallen victim to their arts. He was unique among mages, having the ability to master all forms of magic; and the only form he did not investigate was the one that murdered

him. "Then I'll find a way to stop him."

Skree gave a harsh bark of laughter. "Who is he, this sa'necari?"

"Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan, Prince of Waejontor."

Skree's eyes hooded. "So ... that is why I could not hold him alone. His power is great and terrible. He is the strongest of them." He shook himself, then stared at Josiah, the sarcasm returning to his voice. "And you say you will stop him? You? A wasted drunkard with no training."

"I will stop him," Josiah repeated, calm and unflinching before the sea-mage's contempt.

"How?"

"Because..." Josiah hesitated, reaching into his pocket for the flask of whiskey there. He took a long drag from the bottle. "Because I am ... was Josiah Abelard."

Skree grabbed Josiah, shoved him to the floor, and Read him. He saw instantly the roaring fire of power in the sot's core, greater than anything the sea-mage had ever encountered, but also the way it was twisted and damaged. "Say it again."

Josiah lay unresisting, allowing the sea-mage to see everything. "I am Josiah Abelard."

Skree saw the truth in Josiah's body then and released him. "This is not possible. Abelard was murdered, his soul stolen. Even our people know this thing."

"I don't know how it is or why it is, just that it is."

"I will only help you if you teach me his spells."

"I only know them when I'm drunk," Josiah protested, holding Taun's warnings in the back of his mind: the drink was killing him. "I am only Josiah when I am sufficiently drunk. I am Josh when I am sober." *This was not always so. I fully awakened tonight.*

"Then you will drink and I will learn."

"No," Taun pushed between them. "If he continues to drink, he will die."

Skree shrugged. "If this sa'necari is who this one says, then I will not be able to stop him again without those spells. If he does not drink, the paladin will die."

"And if he drinks, then he will die."

"It is his choice, little seal." Skree locked eyes with Josiah again. "Which is it?"

"I don't want her to die." Josiah's eyes hooded and his lips tightened.

Skree rose, moving to sit beside the bed. "The choice is made."

"No," Taun said. "No! Skree, please, there must be another way."

"Then find it quickly. Tomorrow, sot, we begin."

Taun fled the room.

\* \* \* \*

Skree Read Aejs. The damage to her body was not as bad as he had first feared. The connection between the ha'taren and the sa'necari remained in place: they had managed to temporarily disrupt it, but not sever it; so far as Skree knew only a lifemage could sever it. Perhaps he could set up some kind of shield to mitigate if not completely block the sa'necari from reaching her. His anger fading, Skree began to regret upsetting Taun, but his mate had to understand – after all the years they had been together – how little the life of a drunkard landsmon meant to him.

Josh had left. Becca was sitting in the parlor. Skree joined her at the table, settling into a chair directly opposite from her. An open bottle of good brandy sat in the middle, the cork desultorily in place. Two snifters bracketed the bottle, Becca held another snifter containing a double portion, using both hands together to compensate for her violent shaking.

"First time you have ever faced dark magic?" The sea-mage asked, not unkindly.

Becca nodded. She sloshed some brandy on her face as she managed to down nearly half the snifter in a gulp. She grimaced, lowering the snifter to the table, then pulled a bit of cloth from her pocket to wipe her face. "Never been so scared in my life."

"I have seen folk handle it worse."

"Worse? I balled up and hid under the table."

"You could have bolted and let those tendrils out into the rest of the building. My seals would only have held so long as none of us touched the door or windows."

"Oh, shit!" Becca's eyes widened, and she reached for the snifter, refilling it and polishing the contents off in a single go. "Talk about something else. I don't want to think about what happened. None of it."

"So be it," Skree agreed. "Tell me about Josh. I cannot make an informed decision

without knowing more. Taun is very unhappy with me. So maybe I'll look for another way to handle this."

When Becca finished describing what had happened to Josh's family and how he was found and adopted by a sailor out of Vorgensburg, Skree looked thoughtful. "How old is he?"

"I don't know for certain. Not yet thirty, maybe not much past twenty. I don't know. He looks much older. Too much drink will do that and he started drinking heavily while just a child."

"As will the effects of the rite that burns out the magic. Especially the rite. I have seen twenty year olds who looked closer to fifty after suffering those effects since childhood. That is why my own people, when forced to it, sever the connections to the magic centers rather than burn it out." Skree paused for a moment, reflecting, and then changed the subject. "There was a small colony of landsmyn on one of the outer islands. We traded with them, adopted them. A mage couple with a small son lived there. Highly regarded by my people. Then one day we came to the island, found everyone slain and their son missing. I was the one who first detected the scent of sa'necari. Dolphins spoke of two ships, but could not tell me which had carried the necromancer or even which ship had taken the boy or where either of them had gone."

"You think he might be Josh?"

"I am beginning to. His name was Josiah. The child lisped and said his name as 'Joish'. The name Josh could be a corruption of that. His mother was a descendant of Josiah Abelard and it has been prophesied that the mage master's soul would one day be freed and he would be reborn into his own line with the fullness of his power and knowledge."

Becca nodded. She was beginning to feel the liquor and her violent shaking had subsided into small intermittent tremors. "So Josh is the mage-master."

"Yes. What I want to know now is how he came to be so damaged."

When Becca had finished with that part of the tale, Skree sat in thoughtful silence for a long time. "Did he say who had done this?"

"No. But he was only about seven. He might never have known the mon's name."

"Is there anyone who might know the mon's name?"

"Branch. The old shaman seems to know more about Vorgensburg than even its long time residents, the descendants of the original families. Cedarbird, incidentally, is one of those descendants through his mother."

"Then I will speak to Branch."

\* \* \* \*

Skree threw on a heavy bearskin cloak over his robes, pulling the deep hood down over his face to conceal it. Cold did not bother him, but he did not want to draw unwanted attention from the landsmyn he passed.

"You think Josh is Josiah Stormbird?"

"Possibly. That would lend credence to his claim of being Abelard." Skree slipped his hands into deep-cuffed gloves of supple black leather, concealing the last exposed parts of his green-scaled skin.

"Then you would have to treat him more gently, would you not?" Taun sounded relieved, eager.

"If he's my god-son, yes." *And if he is, I'll find the one who damaged him and feed him to the sharks a bit at a time.* He visualized hanging the mon alive from a ships' prow by a line, with his feet skimming the water as sharks and orcas leaped to take bites out of him. Skree would summon plenty of sharks and orcas and then laugh at the man's screams.

Skree left their rooms, heading down the long hall and turning to the right, away from the common room. He took the old servant's stair in the back, down to the courtyard, and went out into the streets. It was getting dark and few people were abroad. The wind came up. Skree was young for a triton, barely at the end of his first century. His friendship with Tori Stormbird, Josiah's father, had been intense and passionate though not sexual. Tori had had shape-shifting gifts that allowed him to become a dolphin or small whale, and they explored the seas together for a decade, reveling in the sheer adventure. Tori had introduced Skree to Taun and stood as best mon at their handfasting. Skree returned the favor when Tori wed Merann Abelard. Since he would never have children of his own, Skree had embraced god-fatherhood with relish. He had gone to the inner islands for a present for the boy's fifth birthday when the raiders struck. The sea-mage returned to find Tori and Merann murdered with their entire village and the boy stolen. He had smelled sa'necari and, when he could not track the boy, feared he had been taken for a rite of death magic. For a time he was nearly insane with grief and rage, blaming all landsmyn for Tori's death and the boy's disappearance. Taun's abiding love pulled him out of it. When the nerien started his pilgrimage along the coast Skree had secretly hoped that this time he would find the clues he had missed years before. Now it looked as if his efforts had been rewarded.

He opened the gate in the low pole fence surrounding the dozen plank houses of the small Kwaklahmyn trading enclave, causing the bells hung about it to ring loudly. 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 of the main-house. The snow had been shoveled and the ground was clear except for a few scattered patches. He felt the first small inquisitive tickle of mind touch before he even had the gate closed. The door on the main house opened, and a young mon wrapped in a sealskin cloak beckoned to him.

"Harsh weather to be out in this late, Skree," said Bluewings, Branch's oldest granddaughter. "Grandfather has been waiting for you since early afternoon when he felt your thoughts turn toward him."

The longhouse had a sod floor with a large brick hearth at the far end as the only adaptation taken from the Vorgen. Fishing nets, spears, and harpoons hung along the side walls. Woven cedar-bark screens on the second and third tiers – which ran completely around the central chamber – partitioned off sleeping rooms. Ladders connected the tiers. Branch's home was the largest house in the small trading enclave and gatherings were held here.

Branch sat cross-legged before the hearth, wearing soft, deerskin breeches; a loose-sleeved black shirt and soft boots; smoking his long pipe when Skree entered. The shaman's skin was a shade more brown and less bronze than the Sharani; 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 – full blood Kwaklahmyn in every way. Bluewings took the sea-mage's cloak, laying it on the wealth of woven pillows that served as a back for the long bench along the wall. The old shaman nodded at a spot of carpeted floor beside him. "You have not visited in two seasons. What brings you now?"

"I have come for a name." Skree walked over to the spot, but did not sit.

"One of my people?"

"I do not know that he is one of yours, old mon, nor do I know that he isn't," Skree spoke harshly. "But you seem to know much about the light and the dark in Vorgensburg. Very little escapes your notice."

Branch smiled faintly. "I have my sources ... and Raven speaks ever in my ear." He gestured again that Skree should sit beside him. "Sit as a friend or do you now stand as an enemy in my house?"

"I have had only one friend among the landsmyn and he is dead. Why, when I searched this coast twenty years ago did you not tell me you knew where the Abelard boy was?"

"Ah! So this is about Josh." Branch lifted his eyes to Skree's, power burning in their depths. "Well, do you sit or do you leave?"

"I want my answers, old mon."

"You may sit and receive them or you may leave unanswered. Choose, sea-mage, you stand on sanctified ground."

Skree did not miss the threat. This small trading village was the seat of the shaman's power and, as proof of his strong connection with his totem, wild ravens nested in the eaves of his house. Grudgingly, the sea-mage settled to his knees beside Branch. "Why did you not tell me?"

"I had never heard of your kind as spiritfather to a landschild. I had a right to my suspicions, especially when that child is of the Abelard lineage."

Skree heaved a frustrated sigh: Branch's answer made sense. "And yet you allowed the magic to be burned out of him."

"I allowed nothing!" Branch snarled in a sudden, uncharacteristic show of anger. "By the time I knew what his adopted father planned it was already too late. I would have stopped him."

"Then Josh is Tori and Merann's son."

"Yes."

Skree felt his throat tighten and sharp pangs of sorrow shot like arrows through his chest. All this time the boy had been here. All this time... He could have wept, but did not allow it. Later, with Taun, where no one else would see it. "Who damaged him?"

"Is that the name you came for?"

"Yes."

"There is an apostate priest of Kalirion living at the south edge of the Bought Ladies Quarter. His name is Dinger. He tends to the needs of three brothels owned by Cedarbird through a proxy company. Dinger has burned the magic out of many children. Cedarbird is frightened of the possibility of mage children being born to his captive women. I cannot go openly against Cedarbird as it would endanger my people, both here and in some of the northern villages. You did not hear this from me. But you and Aejs? Cedarbird fears Aejs' Rowan."

"Thank you, old mon," Skree said, pulling a tiny packet of sealskin from a pocket of his robes. "I misjudged you." He pressed the packet into Branch's hand. "Accept my apologies."

Branch opened it and stared in amazement at seven scarlet pearls, the rarest of the rare, used in works of tremendous magical power. He folded the packet back up and placed it in his own pocket. "Accepted. May Raven whisper wisdom in your ear."

\* \* \* \*

"I wish Tag were here," Aeijys told Skree, "She knows nearly everyone in the Bought Ladies Quarter." Aeijys gave a snort of laughter. "Hell's Bells, she knows nearly everyone who deals on the wrong sides of town, from thieves to assassins. It's a habit that got her disowned by most of her family. She's an Angtraden."

Skree's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Even I have heard of the Angtraden clan. Then you will help me?"

"Certainly. I owe you. But even if I did not, my god is greatly angered by those who deliberately damage children. I am oath bound to put a stop to it."

"I am the only one of my kind in Vorgensburg. Therefore if I go into the quarter asking about him it will be noted and he will either go into hiding or send myn after me. While I can easily handle the latter, it would complicate matters."

"I realize that. Becca?" Aeijys turned to the tavern master sitting beside Skree; the three of them were alone in her rooms.

"Well, I know for certain that several of our myn spend time in that quarter. Including both Omer and Raim. I could send them in along with two or three others of their choosing if they wished, with the promise of a bonus for finding him."

"Then I could go in after him," Skree said.

"No," Aeijys shook her head. "I want him brought out. I want to talk to him."

"But why? There is no doubt of what he did!" Skree bristled.

"Because," Aeijys said with calm authority. "There may be more to it than a simple apostate priest burning the magic out of children. Most, if not all, priests of Kalirion – apostate or not – would have recognized the Abelard heritage. It is too distinctive not to. I don't think it was happenstance that he got hold of Josh. The Abelard heritage frequently includes life magic."

"His mother, Merann touch-healed. She was not trained, but she could do it. The genocide... This may be far worse than I thought..." Skree fell silent for a time, and then spoke again. "When you are done with him, then he is mine?"

"Yes."

"So be it. Now I must find Josh. I want to know if he remembers his parents. I want him to know who I am."

"Sounds like a plan," Becca chimed.

Aejys laid back, her face pale from effort and pain. Becca noticed and poured out two fingers of holadil, helping her to drink it.

\* \* \* \*

When Skree reached Josh's rooms, Taun was waiting with a surprise: He had convinced Josh to shave. With the beard gone, the sot's face dropped ten years. The sea-mage stood in the doorway, staring in dumbstruck silence at Josh's almost mirror likeness to Tori Stormbird, the high, broad Kwaklahmyn cheekbones, strong jaw and cleft chin. *Save for the eyes. He has Merann's eyes. And he must once have had her fair complexion* . Had he still harbored any doubts about Josh's identity this would have banished them entirely.

"Josiah." Skree took a deep breath and crossed the room. After twenty years of searching he had finally found his landschild godson. What he wanted so desperately was finally within reach and yet he felt so uncertain and awkward, totally unlike his usual arrogant self. He knew that after so many years, considering how small Josiah had been when he disappeared, the mon he had become would probably not remember him. That knowledge made him hesitant and unsure when what he wanted so terribly was to embrace and hold him. He had been so hostile and contemptuous on their previous encounters that Josiah had no reason to trust him. Had he ruined it? Had he destroyed the very thing he wanted most before he even realized he had it?

Josh looked from Taun to Skree and back again, his eyes like a small, trapped animal wanting to bolt before a predator. Sober, he was an entirely different person from the one Skree had encountered previously: reluctant sailor, abused child, very, very lost little boy who had seen his parents murdered, mage child who had had the magic brutally burned from his body. This was a young mon whose spirit had been thoroughly broken and was just hanging on by his fingernails – except when he was drunk and Abelard manifested. Seeing all that in his eyes made Skree ache and behind the ache came a cold icy rage at all who had done this to him.

"Sit down, Josiah. Please. I'm not going to hurt you. I am very sorry I was ugly with you before."

Taun nodded at Josh reassuringly. He still looked uncertain, but he sat. "Taun tells me you knew my parents," Josh ventured in a voice almost too soft to hear. "My real parents."

"We both did. Your father, Tori Stormbird was my best friend. I loved him deeply as a brother. I never had a brother until I met Tori," Skree sucked in a deep breath when he realized he was shaking. "Your mother was Merann Abelard. The kindest, gentlest person I ever knew." He glanced at Taun for reassurance, which the nerien gave him with a smile. Taun and Merann had been very much alike.

"I want..." Josh broke off, then after a moment he tried again. "I want to remember

them, but I can't. Not clearly. It's all hazed out, gray. But the feelings – I remember what it felt like."

"Do you know anything of magic? Mind-magic?"

Josh nodded. "Ground and center. Rapport. Eliahu Solistis taught me last fall."

Skree felt his hopes kindle. If Eliahu had worked with him, then the High Mage of Winter must have believed the damage could either be repaired or circumvented. "The High Mage of Winter?"

Josh nodded again, a bit more confidently. "He's my friend."

"Would you allow me to help you remember your parents?"

"Yes." Josh's face brightened, the last of his fear and uncertainty vanishing.

Skree placed his fingertips lightly on Josh's temples. Josh closed his eyes and slipped into rapport so easily that Skree recognized Eliahu's work even before he caught a glimpse of the winter-mage in Josh's memories. *Eliahu has not changed much in twenty years.*

Skree helped Josh clear the haze from his memories; he felt Josh's flash of startlement at seeing the sea-mage and Taun as well as Tori and Merann. Then Skree opened his own memories of Josiah as a small child and of Tori and Merann to Josh, memories so painfully precious that he had never shared them with anyone, even Taun.

When Skree broke rapport, he saw tears streaking Josh's cheeks.

"I waited for you," Josh's voice shook. "I always believed you would find me – at least when I was a child. After awhile I quit thinking about it, gave up. Gave up on everyone, everything, even myself." He buried his face in his hands, sobbing softly. "I've been so lost ... so long ... so lonely. Oh, Gods! I thought even the Gods themselves had abandoned me."

"I never stopped looking," Skree hugged Josh. "Josiah, I would have found you sooner, but many people were suspicious of a triton searching for a landschild. Especially one of the Abelard heritage. So they did not help me when they knew all along where you were."

"Who?"

"I cannot say. They meant well. They just did not know."

Josh pulled back, giving Skree a sharp look. "It was Branch, wasn't it?"

"Josiah, please..."

"Skree, godfather, until I met Aeijys there was only one person who ever tried to help me. That was Branch. Everyone else wanted to force me to be someone or something I was not."

"Josiah, I am sorry. But his reasons make sense. If a landsmon had come looking for a seachild, I would have done the same thing. I would not have told them. I would have doubted their sincerity, been suspicious of their motives."

"I don't care. I want to talk to him. I want to hear it from him." Josh sprang up, dashing through the door before either Taun or Skree could move to stop him.

Josh got as far as the barn before losing his nerve. He could not go to Branch. Instead he went into Gwyndar's empty stall and sat in the middle of the hay. He felt lost.

"Josiah." Skree came and sat next to him. "I am sorry if I caused you hurt."

"I know."

"I want to try and help you. I want to figure out how and why the alcohol triggers the damaged magic centers. If I could do that, then I might be able to find a way to fix it."

"Really? Could you do that?"

"I can try." Skree put his arm around Josh's shoulders, giving him a companionable hug.

\* \* \* \*

Birdie slept late. She snuggled down in a pile of quilts and comforters. The morning sickness had passed, but Lizard still left her a plate of crackers and cheese each day by the bed. Her belly was rounding and she was just beginning to feel a trifle awkward moving about. She would be fourteen in two months and the special child Dynarien had given her would be born in early summer. She did not know the child's past name, only that he had been a great mage and magical smith in his last life. Dynanna had stressed to her that he would require special teachers: teachers the young priest was beginning to doubt could be found in Shaurone.

A soft mouth nibbled on her ear, drawing her out of sleep. "Not now, Lizard," she said.

"It's not Lizard," a sweet male voice said and Birdie caught the scent of roses.

"Dynarien!" She captured his face and pressed a deep kiss into his mouth.

Dynarien cupped her breasts, rubbing the nipples to hardness, then abruptly released her, and sat back. "We need to talk."

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong and much is right. You must put the word out on the streets and into the highest places, starting with Sonden."

"The High Priest?" Birdie sat up, the covers sliding down around her.

Dynarien glanced at her swollen belly and caressed it gently, distracting himself from his purpose for a moment with the memory of putting the child there; of what it had been like to lie between her legs; and just a small regret that he had robbed her of her own childhood by doing so. She had been such a sweet, wild hoyden then. Surely she would be again once the child was born. She was the best one, perhaps the only one, who could bring Eldarion Havenrain back to the fullness of power and purpose. She had the mage-gift, though it would be more a priest-gift in her. Eventually he would have to tell her that.

As the scions of darkness grew stronger, their plots thickening like gigantic spiderwebs, the need to see the rescued souls reborn became more urgent. A century ago, his sister and he had found a soul vault of the sa'necari. They took all the gems in which the stolen souls of fallen heroes had been imprisoned. Not all their efforts had been successful. Josiah Abelard had become one of their greatest failures. Birdie had been a careful choice. She had the necessary genes and lineages, plus a large streetwise clan to protect the child. Sharani matured young – she was now only a year from full adulthood.

"Yes. Aejs is alive."

"She is?"

"Yes. At the last moment Josiah Abelard saved her. She's in Vorgensburg."

"Wow!" Birdie's eyes sparkled. She and her clan, mostly war-orphans and all of them still children, had fought a war in the streets of Armaten against the Gold Ravens, a rogue assassins guild that served Margren in her efforts to destroy Aejs' friends and family as well as destroying many lifemages. The Market Street Urchins, led by Birdie, prevailed and acquired information that thwarted Margren's attempted coup. But they had failed to save Aejs. Aejs, they were told, had been tortured and slain.

Dynarien smiled. "Yes. Gather all you can to her banner, soldiers and settlers. Go to Iarwind Castle. Give the news to her friend Tagalong Smith and her lover Tamlestari. And then lead them all to Vorgensburg."

"I can do that," Birdie said with much of her old cocky self-assurance.

"And raise your child on the northwest coast in Aejs' realm. You will find teachers there for him."

"Okay, I will. Now, can we do the other thing?" She gave him a lecherous grin. "I mean, it's not as if I could get pregnant..."

Dynarien laughed softly. Maybe he had not done as much damage to her as he feared. He had, after all, asked her permission and made certain that she knew that first coupling would result in pregnancy (the kyndi, which blocked immature girls from becoming pregnant, could protect them from men, but not from gods, even a minor one like himself); that he was giving her a special child, bringing an ancient hero back into incarnation. His sister, Dynanna, who was Birdie's liege-god, had insisted on this pregnancy in exchange for the aid Birdie requested of them. He could not say why he felt guilty about all this, but suspected it stemmed from the argument he had with Talons Trollbane at Dragonshead nearly a month ago.

"If you truly want me."

"I do. I truly do." Birdie pushed her night robe over her head. "I've learned some things." She lay back with her young breasts peeking over the covers. Dynarien climbed onto the bed and mouthed her nipple. Birdie moaned.

\* \* \* \*

Dinger moved down the row of glass tanks, gently rousing each serpent in turn with a touch of his magic. He had blood on his hands and a bit of meat in his fingers. Normally his pets preferred their meat alive and wiggling, but magic and chemicals in the flesh drew them and they took it from his fingers. He drew symbols on their heads in blood. The room was well lit, for this was a special working. When he finished with this serpent, he returned to the long table standing against the wall. A child's corpse laid cooling there, surrounded by bottles and jars filled with strange chemicals, potions, and herbs. He measured from each into two bowls.

Desperate with hunger and cold, the small street child had been easy to entice into the ruined building. The boy had thought that all Dinger wanted was to perhaps play with his privates. Dinger suspected the child had learned to trade such things to adults for shelter and food. He had even stripped off his pants before Dinger could ask him to once they were in the warm rooms beneath the floors.

The sa'necari cut off pieces of the child's flesh and dropped them into the liquid first, letting them sit. He pressed his face into the open cavity of the child's stomach, licking around the edges, remembering the boy's terror when he saw the fangs lengthening in Dinger's mouth. The boy tried to run, but Dinger slammed and locked the doors with a gesture. The boy cowered in the corner, his back pressing into the hinges of the door hard enough to leave an interesting mark on his flesh. Dinger

caught him easily. The boy screamed as Dinger's fangs took him in the throat, and then went still as Dinger seized his mind. Sometimes he did not take their minds, just let them thrash about in pain and terror as they died. This one had tasted so fine, surprisingly so for an underfed street child. One day Dinger would have better fare – when this city was brought to heel. Then he would have women, fine women, instead of the occasional cast-off whore from Cedarbird's brothels. Dinger took the meat from the liquid and rolled them in the chemicals and herbs. He had just started toward another tank with the treated flesh when he heard a quiet voice speaking in his mind and straightened. "Master?"

*<Go to the scrying bowl. We must speak. I have something for you . >*

Dinger returned the bit of flesh to the bowl of liquid, it would keep better there, and he did not want it to dry out. His pets did not like it as well then.

He took a large bowl from a shelf and filled it with a mix of blood and wine. He stroked the bowl with his mind and an image appeared. Mephistis' saturnine face looked out at him. Then Dinger saw another face and recognized it with a start: Lord Hoon.

"We know Aejs is alive," Mephistis stated simply. "I suffer from deijanrael for want of her. I can kill her through the link, but not while her mages protect her. You must kill them all."

"I cannot get past the shaman's wards, Master," Dinger replied. "As you well know."

"I have the way past the wards," Hoon told him. "But I expect to have it back when the deed is done."

A circle of bone with a skull-like face woven of human skin, gut, and flesh appeared in the bowl. Dinger took it out.

"Do you understand?" Hoon demanded. "It returns to me when this is done."

"Yes, Lord Hoon. It will be done."

"And Aejs? You are not to harm her. Just prepare her for my pleasure," Mephistis told him.

"Yes, Master."

"You are not even to taste her. When I am done, you will fill preserving bottles with her blood and send them to me. They are mine and mine alone. You will not even taste from them."

The bowl went blank. Dinger raised it to his lips and drank it down. It felt good, but

it was only whore's blood and cheap wine, which was the best he could afford. Now Aeijys' blood: that must be powerful blood. Her faith in her liege-god had been legendary. She had worked miracles in Her name. She had twice been pulled close to death by the bite of a baneblade and survived somehow. He would keep some for himself. Mephistis need not know. But he would not taste her while she lived, Mephistis would sense his taint there.

Best of all, he would finally kill Josiah. He had come down to Vorgensburg thirty years ago, hunting the last of the Abelard bloodline to eliminate the possibility of the mage-master returning. The shaman, Branch had frustrated him in his attempts to get the child. He hated Branch and shook with rage at the thought of him. Not only had the child grown into a man, but also he had somehow gotten the magic back. He had returned the child to his foster-father, that stupid cretin of a sailor, after burning the magic out as he had been paid to do. He thought he would find the child again later when no one was looking and take mortgiefan from him: not only would that have ended the bloodline, but it would have given Dinger much of the Abelard power as well. But that damned Kwaklahmyn bastard shaman had warded Josiah. He would have them all dead. He would force the shaman to watch as he took mortgiefan from his beloved granddaughter, Bluewings. That would teach him to interfere! He could almost hear her screams in his mind, feel her body struggling beneath him as he entered her and began slipping the blade in.

His manhood stirred at the image he conjured and he reached down to stroke himself. He had only one captive whore left in the cages in the tunnels. He had been saving her as a hedge against acute need. However, he would soon have all the women he wanted. He could glutton on them, highborn as well as low. She would have to do until he could get his hands on Bluewings. He opened the next door down and walked out into the tunnels.

\* \* \* \*

Linden's scrying room occupied the northeast corner of the guesthouse. Nothing in the room suggested its darker purposes. Beautiful stones lined the small pool in the center and covered the bottom of it, their beauty intensified by the water covering it: Azurite, hematite, jet, moonstone, obsidian, and tiger-eye. Around the edges of the room sat crimson velvet chairs and a couch.

Margren reclined on the couch, watching Mephistis and Hoon who stood regarding what they had seen in the pool. "When she has risen and eaten her loved ones," Margren growled, "I want her brought here, you promised she would be my toy."

Mephistis bent and kissed Margren's cold lips. "So she will be. Now I think you need to feed."

Hoon smiled, a thin, sardonic look that did not match his eyes. "Tell the servants, I ordered full meals to be taken in my bedroom. We will join you there."

The irritation vanished from Margren's face and she glowed. "As you wish, Lord Hoon." She thrust her breasts up in his direction, walking away with a seductive twist to her hips.

Mephistis followed Margren out. He paused at the door. "Are you coming?"

"I have a couple of matters to take care of. Save one for me, highness."

Hoon lingered at the scrying pool. He found Margren delightful, but she was not the one he wanted most. Whatever undead form Aeijys rose as, he had the power to twist it into something better once she arrived in his castle. Hoon had powers and knowledge no other vampire – save the one who had made him – had ever had before, things the sa'necari who ruled Waejontor could not even guess at: Gylolean Galee, passed easily for living, she was practically a god of darkness, her powers rivaling those of the yuwenghau – the young gods with little or no followings – such as Dynarien and Dynanna. Yuwenghau tended to be wanderers like their cousins, the demi-gods, and Galee had eaten more than a few of them in her own travels. They had been lovers, mentor and student, nearly four millennia ago, before she abandoned him, disappearing into the east. Only one woman had stirred his desires as strongly as Galee – not even his dead wife, Amalthea: Aeijystrys Rowan.

He remembered the day Aeijystrys outmaneuvered him on the battlefield and almost caught him. He had barely escaped. She looked so proud and strong in her armor, the power of her faith radiating from her in a golden aura. Their eyes had met for an instant, and he knew then that he would not be completely fulfilled until he had her. His immortality would be a wondrous thing with her at his side.

\* \* \* \*

Josh sat in the parlor long after Aeijys fell asleep. He took a pull from the flask, which he had not returned to Taun after the incident at Solstice. It was nearly empty. Josiah awakened, looking out of Josh's eyes at the small room. Then he rose, moving to the chair beside the bed. He did not want to wake her by crawling in with her as Josh usually did.

"Shularrien ... by what strange chance did I find you again? Can Nariya be near?"

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### TRUST

It snowed heavily on winter solstice, two days after Isranon arrived at Claw's farm. Isranon sat upon the deep window sill, his legs drawn up with his knee and shoulder against the panes, watching the wild swirls and listening to the howling of the gale outside. Taking refuge in his music, he lifted his flute to his lips and played softly,

the tune was sad and low, laced with the poignant melancholy of his heart. Two months past his eighteenth birthday, the youth felt old and spiritually worn out.

Visitors to the valley always stayed in the chieftain's huge home: Claw Redhand did not want them wandering the clan lands too freely. Isranon had always been the exception; he had the freedom of the valley. Claw's wife, Aisha, kept this room ready for Isranon, no matter how long he was away. As soon as Aisha knew Isranon had arrived, she had sent servants up to dust and freshen the sheets and blankets, get a fire going in the hearth to warm it. She treated him like family, and this house was the closest to thing to a home he had ever had.

He worked hard at fitting in at the farm, and Aisha was lavish in her praise and small favors, surprising him with treats and presents as tokens of a job well done, making it very clear that she had never had another guest in her life who had ever become so special. Isranon was also the only person the clan had ever broken the no hunting rule for, the only one they ever allowed to hunt with them. He loved to hunt, and hunting with the lycan, the only mon among wolves – the form they hunted in – was wild beyond dreaming.

Troyes resented it. Where Isranon had been the outsider at Mephistis' citadel, at the prince's court, among the sa'necari – who should have been his own people – here among the lycan clan, Isranon was at home and Troyes was the outsider.

"Isranon!" Nevin knocked on the door and then entered, drawing a chair close to his young friend and straddling it. He studied Isranon's face for a long time, his expression thoughtful. Nevin was his guurmondru: brother, friend, teacher. The easiest translation was godfather, but it was a vastly inaccurate one.

He, like the others at the farm, had known Isranon since the youth was eight and now he was eighteen. The last four years Isranon had dwelled in their valley only intermittently, following his prince more often than not, and they had missed him. Especially Nevin. Twelve years his senior, and not old enough to be his father, Nevin had nevertheless taken Isranon under his wing when the boy first arrived in the valley, and remained so until Mephistis had discovered the boy's nature and carried him off at six months past his fourteenth birthday – the coming of age birthday, at which time Nevin had given him the blades he wore and cared for so diligently. The lycan had trained Isranon to fight, even as Isranon's father had once taught the youth to hide. Nevin had knowingly created a dichotomy in Isranon, a conflict of which path's teachings to follow.

The youth wondered what Nevin saw there, whether he could see the sorrow at his core, the changes that the years among his own kind had wrought. Isranon lowered the flute. "Hello, Nevin."

"They treated you hard, pup?"

Isranon shrugged. "They are sa'necari."

Nevin had not wanted Isranon to go with Mephistis four years ago and, when they had visited here two years past tried again, he had tried to talk him out of continuing on with his prince.

"Just because you were born sa'necari, Isranon, does not make you one of them."

Isranon turned his face to the window. "I know that."

"How long will you be here?"

"Until my prince sends for me. Troyes is supposed to continue on to King Baaltrystan."

"That's well," Nevin growled deep in his throat. Had he been in wolf form, his hackles would have risen to match the sound. Then his visage softened. "Have you spoken to Merissa?"

"A little." Isranon was uncertain how he felt about Merissa, Claw's daughter, who was a year younger than he. When they were children she used to say she intended to marry him when she grew up and then chase him through the woods trying to kiss him. If she could not catch him on two legs, she would change shape and chase him on all fours. Isranon had always considered that unfair and shinnied up the nearest tree quick as a squirrel, where he would sit until an adult came to end the game. Last time he had come here, Merissa had chased him in a different fashion, teasing and playful with seductive looks and words.

There had been none of that so far, yet he still felt a sense of trepidation that sent his pulse racing whenever she walked into the room. His first venture into love had been Rose, the little nibari from Mephistis' common herd, and the sa'necari had murdered her two months ago out of spite because he refused to play their games. Isranon had promised himself that he would never fall in love again, because his kind – the Dark Brothers – were not meant for love. If Merissa started after him again, he would put a stop to it, although he had no idea how.

"Have you and Merissa fallen out?"

Isranon tried not to open up on that subject, tried to hold back, even though Nevin was the person he had always gone to growing up.

The scarred lycan regarded him closely, leaning over the back of the chair he straddled. "Talk to me. I read you like a book."

Isranon managed a small unhappy smile. "I fell in love."

"And you didn't bring her with you? Or him?"

Isranon lowered his head. So even that had not been missed by Nevin – the fact that Isranon loved both sexes. "She's dead."

"Ahh, boy. I'm sorry." Nevin rose from his chair and wrapped his arms around Isranon. That unleashed the flood that Isranon had been holding in for two months and he wept into Nevin's shoulder.

\* \* \* \*

The table at the Chieftain's house was set out with great quantities of food. A whole steer had been roasted and several ducks baked into pies. The root cellar had been raided for heaping bowls of steaming potatoes, onions, parsnips, and radishes. A variety of cheeses and fresh baked breads had been set out. A keg of mead had been opened as well as several bottles of wine.

Isranon sat between two lycans of Claws' household. The nibari served. As the eldest son of Lord Feodras, Troyes deserved a high place at the table, and had been seated across from Merissa. Isranon and Troyes were the only two sa'necari presently at the Manor. It disturbed Isranon to see Merissa seated so close to Troyes, bantering with him. She stirred odd feelings in Isranon that he was reluctant to explore. He saw Merissa, but he kept thinking about Rose.

"Your daughter is very beautiful, Lord Claw," Troyes said, gesturing at Merissa with his wine glass and smiling politely. "As befits a lycan clan princess."

Merissa blushed prettily.

"Pretty enough," Claw responded in a crusty tone.

"Is she pledged yet?"

Claw frowned. "No. But she will marry within the clan."

Isranon did not like where this might be going. On the one hand, it meant that he was safe from Merissa's snares, according to Claw's declaration. However, the mere fact that Troyes had brought it up, made Isranon wonder if Troyes had become fixated upon her. There was no question that Merissa was beautiful. Lycan clans, especially those who kept the older ways, disapproved – often violently – of their kind marrying sa'necari. He hoped that Merissa had better sense than to allow herself to be seduced by Troyes.

When Troyes' eyes were not on the others, Isranon could feel them slide across him, certain that the sa'necari was still trying to discern his own place in the household. The lycans had greeted him as one of their own and there was no way that Troyes could have missed that. Isranon caught Nevin watching him curiously and then studying Troyes.

*Damn.* Nevin was right about being able to read him. It seemed like there was nothing he could conceal from his mentor. Isranon pushed back his plate and rose from the table.

As he mounted the stairs, heading for his rooms, Isranon heard someone behind him and turned to find Nevin at his shoulder. "Did that one give you trouble on your way here?"

Isranon swallowed. "He's sa'necari," he said as if that explained everything.

"You're holding too much inside, boy."

"Another time, mei gurr. I want to be alone."

Nevin sucked in a breath through his nostrils. "As you wish. If he's been trouble for you, depend on it, he'll be trouble for the house."

Isranon nodded. "Perhaps tomorrow we'll talk."

Once he had gotten inside his rooms and sat down on his bed, Isranon wondered whether Nevin meant that Troyes would cause trouble for the house simply because he was that kind of person, or whether his causing trouble for Isranon would be viewed in the light of Isranon's own relationship here. The lycans protected their own. Was that what Nevin had meant? That the lycans would protect him from Troyes? Either way, it was not something he wanted to face. While the lycans could certainly pull Troyes down, if it came to a fight Troyes would take several of them down with him. He hoped that Troyes would move on once the storm passed. He had been able to talk about Rose because it was past, but he did not yet feel ready to confide about Troyes.

\* \* \* \*

As a reflection of the uncertain times, the clan had added a modest salle to the Great House. Clan Red Wolf were farmers and herders, not a battle clan, although all of them knew their weapons and Claw kept a small number of myn-at-arms present. The day had warmed enough to melt the snow on the roofs, although spring was still nearly two months off. A large stone hearth in the middle warmed it. Weapons hung upon the walls and there were brackets for torches.

"You kept up your blade work?" Nevin demanded, taking some wooden practice swords from the walls. He tossed one to Isranon.

"Yes."

They went round for several minutes with Nevin pressing Isranon hard. Isranon's arms began to ache from meeting the force of Nevin's blows. He lost his footing under the impact of one, twisted aside, and rolled to his feet, springing up with a

stout whack to Nevin's belly. The old wolf whoofed and stepped back, signaling an end to it.

"You didn't learn that from a sa'necari," Nevin remarked as they sat sweating.

Sa'necari rarely used swords, favoring their magic and their runed hellblades of various types. "No. I learned from a vampire. Dane Jayce. He befriended me."

Nevin made a disparaging sound. The lycans were as skeptical and suspicious of the vampires as they were of the sa'necari necromancers. He threw a towel at Isranon to wipe the sweat off his face and arms. They were both drenched in it. Nevin shrugged out of his sweaty shirt, drying himself off, watching for Isranon to do the same. Instead, Isranon headed for the house.

Nevin followed him to his rooms. The youth simply stood in the middle of the sitting room, staring at him uneasily. "Go on, get into something dry before the sweat chills," Nevin told him, then went into the youth's bedroom and dug out a clean shirt, which he tossed to him.

Isranon caught the shirt, but continued to hesitate, clutching it to his stomach. Nevin frowned more deeply. The youth had never been shy of changing in front of him before. Nevin grasped the bottom edge of the sweaty shirt Isranon wore with a suspicious glance at his face. Isranon's hands closed on the lycan's, holding him off for an instant, then released him. Nevin pulled the shirt up, gave a savage snarl at what he saw beneath it, and brought it over Isranon's head, exposing his stomach and chest. He threw the shirt in a corner of the floor, snarling louder. Isranon's upper body was a mass of scars. They both knew that Isranon did not heal as well as other sa'necari, those who were steeped in the rites, but this was beyond belief.

Nevin dragged Isranon, unresisting, to a chair and sat him down, then knelt in front of him to study them. Isranon shivered as Nevin's rough fingers traced the worst of them, two crossing his chest and three puckered scars in his lower ribs. "They treated you rough, boy. You had two when you left here four years ago. Now you're covered in them."

Isranon winced away from his words. "They're sa'necari. I don't heal as well as they do."

"That's not an answer. They had no right." Anger edged Nevin's voice. "It looks like they tried to kill you."

"They did. Mephistis..." he said helplessly. The sa'necari were predators, respecting only power, always hungry with an arrogant philosophy of *"If I can kill and eat it, and should wish to, then it is my right to do so."* There was no honor, no compassion, and little true humanity in this – they were a culture almost without morality. Before Isranon met Mephistis, he would have said they were truly amoral. Yet Mephistis had never wavered in his commitment to Isranon and the young mon

returned it with trust and devotion.

"He allowed this?"

"No. He rescued me." Isranon focused his eyes away from Nevin, not wanting to argue about Mephistis and hoping that his mentor would not press the matter.

"Still ... how can you say you'll answer if he calls?"

"I love him. He's my prince."

"Love? As a mon for a mon, or a mon for a prince."

"As a mon for a prince. Mephistis has been good to me."

Nevin snarled. "I don't call what I'm seeing on you good."

Isranon began to get his old, proud look in his eyes, his back straightening, and his head coming up high. It was an attitude he rarely showed toward Nevin.

"Don't go back to him," Nevin said.

"When he calls, I will answer," Isranon said, drawing the fresh shirt over his head to end Nevin's examination. Part of him wanted to either run away or remain at the farm forever, out of reach of sa'necari politics and appetites. But the stronger part of him, that core that bound him in chains of honor and devotion, would never allow it. "I would not wish to live with myself should I fail my prince."

"Then they will kill you."

"They will anyway," Isranon's voice softened and some of the stiffness went out of his shoulders and the angle of his head. "I am the last and after me there will be no more."

"And that is what you want?" Nevin seized his shoulders, giving him a shake.

Isranon met his gaze steadily. "I was doomed by my birth. Only the circumstances of my death are my choice – I can die trying to flee fate or standing beside my prince in full honor."

"Honor is a harsh master."

"You taught it to me."

\* \* \* \*

Merissa sat in the spinning room before a warm fire with the carding combs in her

hands, slowly working the fine wool back and forth until it was straight and clean. A half filled basket of the carded wool rested on the floor between her knees. Two baskets of the uncarded wool sat beside her. The clan had several herds of sheep and goats. One of the goat herds, a breed called kazamerie, had hair so fine that a shawl from it could be drawn through a ring and yet was wondrously warm. Only the family was allowed to work with the wool at this stage, not the clumsy servants who had less to gain from it. Her mother and aunts did the weaving of it in the common sitting room on huge looms. She wore a voluminous skirted cream dress with a tight, stiff bodice that cupped her breasts and molded itself to them. A cream hair net held her hair in place. Everything was cream, the color of this wool so that the loose fibers would not show when they floated across as some always did. One of the reasons she liked carding was that the lanolin in the wool made her hands so soft.

She worked steadily, drifting off into daydreams. While the clan called her a princess, she was really just a clan chieftain's daughter. At least that was how she thought of it. Real princesses, like those at the court of King Baaltrystan, did not card wool and weave. She was not certain exactly what they did, beyond the descriptions of balls and intrigue in some old books, but Merissa was certain it was far more pleasant and interesting than this.

Taking another handful of the raw wool, Merissa began to card again with a deep sigh. All of her suitors were clan and none of them suited her. The very last thing she wished was to remain stuck in this valley or another clan valley with each year much like the one before it. Troyes intrigued her. No sa'necari who had come through this valley over the years had ever paid her so much attention, but perhaps that had been nothing more than the fact that before now she had been a child. Now she was seventeen, a woman.

The door opened as if her thoughts had called him and Troyes came in. He moved aside some of the baskets and drew a chair over beside her, settling into it. Merissa's heart quickened. They had been flirting for days, but this was the first time she found herself alone with him.

Troyes gave her a languid smile, his eyes soft and sensual. He ran his finger along her arm and took the combs away from her, setting them atop one of the baskets. Merissa shivered at his touch. He stirred her longings in ways that the lycan males did not. Troyes regarded her a moment, then leaned in and brushed his lips across hers. She caught her breath sharply at the electric tingle it sent racing through her body. Her loins grew wet and aching. Troyes kissed her again and this time he parted her lips with his tongue, sliding it inside. Merissa responded tentatively, twining her tongue with his, wanting him to touch more of her. Her hands crept up his arms and linked behind his neck.

The chair arms separated them, but Troyes leaned as far over as he could and fondled her breasts as he continued to kiss her. Merissa moaned softly. He moved to the floor and drew her after him. She went unresisting and lay there on her back as

Troyes pressed his body on top of hers, moving against her. He pushed her long skirt up, reaching for her small clothes to move them aside. She caught his hands and stopped him.

"They will catch us. Mother comes up for wool or sometimes to check on me."

Troyes rolled off her, went to the door, and drew a sign upon it. A black sigil formed, sank into the wood, and vanished to be sensed rather than seen. Then he returned to her.

"Troyes, please. I don't wish to go any farther."

Troyes' eyes narrowed and his smile became poisonous. "You've been teasing me for days, weeks. Parading your charms and practically begging me to touch them. I am not one of your farmer boys. I am a grown man, and a sa'necari. I will not tolerate having you get me worked up, and then withholding what you have promised with your eyes and manner."

Merissa shivered harder as he knelt between her legs and removed her underwear. His fingers probed her with his thumb on the knob of her clit. She whimpered in a tangled web of fright and desire.

"A virgin. You surprise me, princess of farmers. I understand both your need and your reluctance." He drew his hand back and licked her juices off his fingers. "Anyone coming to this door will suddenly find something else to do," Troyes told her. "Do not fear discovery."

Merissa swallowed. She had not meant to go this far, but now there seemed to be no way out of it. She had never gone beyond petting with her lycan suitors. Yet, the fear was part of the attraction. Merissa had been craving the feel of a male, a powerful male, inside her for two years now. If she did not yield to Troyes, she had no doubt that he would force her and hurt her. The sa'necari was completely different from the lycan youths who had tolerated her retreat before it went too far. He was older, stronger than anyone she had ever flirted with – stronger than any male she had ever known.

If she screamed, it would bring her father and Isranon, and Troyes would kill them. And with all the flirting, it would be assumed she had encouraged him, possibly come to him willingly, and then cried rape to conceal her sins. Either way she was disgraced. She wanted to weep and make excuses, but she knew it was already too late. So she did not move from where he had left her.

Troyes unlaced his pants and lifted himself out.

Merissa's breath caught in her chest at the size of his member, long, hard and thick – more so than she had expected a male to look. Her pulse raced with fear and an oddly delicious anticipation as fear seemed to increase her need and make it sweeter.

His knob bumped against her clit and the entrance to her womanhood, causing it to tingle. Her loins grew wet and she squirmed, uncertain of what he expected her to do and wanting to touch him.

"Don't move," Troyes admonished. He settled his heavy bulk atop her and pressed her down, pinning her. Then he entered her without another word. Merissa cried out softly as her maidenhead tore. Blood coated Troyes' cock and stained Merissa's white dress by pooling beneath her hips. Tears ran down her cheeks and he kissed them away.

"Put your legs around me," Troyes ordered and Merissa obeyed. "I will teach you the arts of the slut."

Merissa's crying worsened and he ignored it. Any man she lay with after this, any husband she might be given to, would wonder who had been first. A husband might even repudiate her on learning she was not virgin. Had she been a commoner, it would not have mattered, but there were different standards for the Chieftain's daughter.

It seemed as if he sawed at her forever, lasting long after her tissues had begun to dry and she was becoming sore. Merissa wondered if it was always like this, but there would be no one to ask without revealing what had been done to her. Finally, he seeded her and rolled off, to lie there gazing at her. Her underdress was wet with his fluids.

Troyes stroked her hair. "You are very beautiful, princess of farmers. You belong at the King's court, not doing a servant's work ... come to my bed tonight and let me show you how it could be."

Merissa sucked in a deep breath, her head reeling with confusion. "I – I don't..."

Troyes kissed her again with exquisite thoroughness, opened her bodice and took out one of her breasts. His tongue ran around the nipple teasing it to hardness. Merissa moaned low like an animal. His fangs came down and entered the blue vein above the nipple. She gasped sharply and then felt herself swept up as his power took the pain of his feeding from her. Troyes was very skillful. When, at last, he lifted his bloody mouth from her breast he asked again. "Come to my bed tonight?"

"Yes."

\* \* \* \*

Merissa dashed to her rooms when Troyes eventually finished with her and striped out of the bloodstained dress. She felt a wince at the hymenal blood, the darkness of it. It had been bright red before it dried. Merissa rolled it up carefully and shoved it in her hearth where she piled wood on top of it and burned it. A lycan would know from the smell of it what she had done. She poured cold water from an ewer into a

basin and thoroughly cleaned her loins and inside herself of all vestiges of Troyes' seed and fluids. Then she called for a bath to be drawn. When she was finally alone in the hot, soothing water, tears came again. Troyes had created such a confusing mix of emotions, frightening and thrilling her. But also leaving her with a sense of shame. One half of her called it rape and another called it seduction. Out of nowhere, she suddenly found herself saying aloud, "Isranon, it should have been you."

\* \* \* \*

Isranon woke in the night after hours of restless stirring, threw on a robe and headed out into the corridor. He had no need of a candle to see with, as sa'necari possessed an innate ability to see in the dark. As he drew near to the stairs, he heard a door open and saw Merissa step into the hallway. Then he realized what room she had come out of: Troyes'. She saw him and flicked the collar of her sleeping dress up. Isranon did not like that and caught her hand, forcing it down.

"Don't," Merissa hissed.

Isranon saw the bruising around the tiny punctures. Troyes was very skilled and there would be no mark soon, even had Merissa not been lycan. It upset him badly to see this and that in turn angered him. The clan kept plenty of nibari as feeders for their guests; Troyes did not need to be drinking from Merissa. "Don't play nibble games with Troyes, Merissa," Isranon said. "He's dangerous."

"Why should you care what I do?" Merissa snarled back at him. "You've spoken barely two words with me since you returned."

"Merissa, please, I don't want to fight with you."

"Then don't."

She started to push past him and he caught her arm, pleading with his eyes and voice, "Please, Merissa. Troyes is a very powerful sa'necari. Not of the first rank, but very powerful."

"I know that. I'm not a child any longer, Isranon. I'm a woman now. I have needs. Did you think I was going to spend the rest of my life chasing you?"

"I never asked you to chase me in the first place," Isranon said wearily. "We're friends."

"Is that all?" Merissa smacked him hard, open-handed, and he let her go.

Isranon watched her disappear back to her rooms.

A soft chuckle made him look at the door again. Troyes leaned against the door facing, "Can't even get it up for a real woman, half-a-mon?"

"Stay away from Merissa," Isranon growled, stiffening. Dressed in a night robe, he did not have his blades. While the peace of the valley should have held, he did not trust Troyes and without his blades he felt naked, aware of his weakness before this creature. Yet he would not back down. That much was not in him.

"Or what?" Troyes stroked Isranon's cheek.

Isranon stepped away from him, his hands clenching into fists. "Don't touch me."

"Perhaps if you offered to come to my bed instead of her? You let my bastard brother Malthus put it up your ass often enough."

"Malthus?" Revulsion rose from Isranon's stomach into the back of his throat. He had had a brief affair with Malthus three years ago. The mon had found a way to deceive Isranon's arcane senses and pass for human. One night in the throes of passion, Malthus revealed the truth by biting Isranon. He would never forget trying to fight his way off the bed when he realized the truth, only to have the older, more powerful, and much more experienced Malthus overwhelm him with his arcane talents. The humiliation and pain of being raped at fifteen by Malthus had never left him. "Your brother?"

"One of my father's many bastards. He brags about your ass." Troyes leaned in and kissed Isranon lightly on the mouth.

Isranon shoved Troyes from him, and walked away, leaving Troyes laughing at his retreating back. Once in the common sitting room, he sat on the floor before the banked coals and shivered.

\* \* \* \*

"Troyes' belongings are still here," Claw observed coming down the stairs into the kitchens where Aisha and the servants had set out breakfast. "So I assume he'll be back in a few days."

Isranon looked up from his food to see that Claw was dressed for riding. Several of them would be riding fence that morning to check for breaks through which the cattle could escape. They kept the large livestock in the near pastures during the winter. Troyes had told them he was riding into the village two days ago and had not yet returned.

Isranon followed Claw out to the stables once breakfast was done and mounted up with the others who would be riding that day. Hammers, nails, and axes were among the requirements for this, along with some strong rope. They would mend them roughly and mark them for a more substantial work crew to come through later.

The day was bright with the snow reflecting the sunlight strongly enough to glare

into Isranon's eyes as he rode. He found a rail down and dismounted, slinging his saddlebag over his shoulder as he moved to nail it back into place. The top rail had fallen over the far side. He tried to reach it, cautiously avoiding putting any of his weight against the other rails, and could not, so he put his hand on the post and jumped it. Holding the rail into position on one end, he carefully nailed it back, then went to the other end and began on that. The whack, whack, whack of the hammer on iron nails and the thud of driving it into the wood masked other sounds until the one who had been watching him stepped into view.

"Hello, Isranon." Troyes leaned against a tree, arms folded, sneering slightly. He exuded a predatory sensuality that disturbed Isranon, running his eyes over the younger mon's body. His tongue emerged from his mouth and ran along his lips teasingly.

Isranon watched him, the hammer shifting in his hand so that it was held as a weapon rather than a tool. "What do you want?"

"You know what I want. What I've always wanted since Dragonshead. You."

"Let me be!" Isranon snarled. He felt violated by Troyes' stalking, his unwanted attention, and bitterly resented that the one place where he should have been safe was being desecrated by this sa'necari's appetites. Wasn't it enough that he had taken Merissa? His stance widened to give him greater balance in fighting as Troyes sauntered up to him.

"I cannot understand why you let them make a servant of you. This is a way station, we're guests of the crown."

"I help because I want to." Isranon's eyes narrowed. Troyes came within arms length of him. Every fiber of his being cried out to strike Troyes down. But it was a fight he would lose unless his first blow killed the larger male. He hesitated, bound up in his father's teachings of non-violence. He could almost hear his father's voice saying *'Be strong in the Teachings. Those who live by violence, die by it. ' The teachings were like cords of steel around him for an instant. Father, those who do not live by violence also die by it. You and the others are dead.*

Troyes moved to Isranon's side, nuzzled his neck and Isranon could feel the faint prick of his fangs. Then Nevin's teachings, which had always run counter to his father, flashed through him with the revulsion of Troyes' touch, and Isranon knocked the sa'necari aside with his shoulder under Troyes' chin. Isranon kicked Troyes hard in the chest, landing him in the snow, and raised the hammer.

"Touch me and die," Isranon growled.

"You will regret this," Troyes said, rising to his feet, black energy forming around his fingers. "My brother had you. I'll have you. Willing or not."

"You'll have to kill me first."

"That can be arranged."

In the heat of the moment, they had not heard another rider approach.

"What happens here?" Nevin dismounted.

Troyes laughed, drew back the magic, and walked off.

Isranon found that he could suddenly breathe easier, and had not realized that his breathing before had been anything but steady. "Nothing."

Nevin frowned deeply, which made his scarred face a hideous mask. He touched Isranon's neck, bringing away a few drops of blood. "Nothing?"

Isranon's head came up and his shoulders straightened to a proud angle. "I can handle it."

"Arrogant pup. What if you can't?"

"I can handle it!" Isranon winced away from him as Nevin tried to turn him about to see into his eyes.

"Sooner or later, pup, you're going to have to talk to me."

"When I'm ready." *"I am not going to endanger the clan by making this their business. If Troyes forces a confrontation with them, it will not be because of me. Merissa, what would they do if they knew you were sleeping with Troyes?"* He picked up the other end of the rail and went back to nailing it in place.

\* \* \* \*

Nevin watched Troyes closely. Granted, with winter still socking the valley in, there was little space in the Great House for Isranon to completely avoid the sa'necari, but Nevin suspected far more was going on there than either of them let on. He sat before the fire in the common sitting room, oiling his blades with a soft cloth.

The clan had never been fond of the sa'necari who ruled Waejontor and, when King Baaltrystan lost two-thirds of his kingdom to Shaurone in the aftermath of the war, they had hoped that meant they would no longer have to deal with them. However, that had not proven to be the case. Their valley had become one of the first way stations that Baaltrystan established in the occupied territories. The Waejontori had no intention of either allowing Shaurone to retain possession of those lands or to cease in their attempts to take Shaurone itself. They maintained an uneasy accommodation with Baaltrystan. They did not want the Waejontori to come raging through their valley from their citadels hidden deeper within the higher mountains,

nor did they wish for the Sharani to find their valley, which nestled in the rocky warrens of the mountains. After all these years the Sharani were still exploring and mapping. They had become cautious where the Lionhawk had been bold, slamming through their lands with the fury of an autumn storm.

*What fools they had been to exile that one. The Lionhawk would have found this farm and many others,* Nevin thought.

Nevin watched Merissa exclaiming over a bracelet Troyes had purchased for her at the nearest village. Troyes smiled and his hand stole over hers. The sa'necari seemed to be courting Merissa, and Nevin might have believed it had he not seen the way that Troyes' eyes kept sliding across to Isranon. Everything about Troyes set Nevin's neck hairs to standing. Mephistis had told that male to move on, but he hadn't. Nevin was close to deciding to have a talk with Claw about it.

Isranon had a book open on his lap, but seemed to be paying very little attention to it. The youth was watching Merissa and Troyes over the edge of it. Nevin could see the way his eyes moved. Finally he snapped it shut and left. Nevin rose and followed him.

"Can I talk to you?" Nevin asked as Isranon started to close his sitting room door.

Isranon had an odd look in his eyes, almost pained. He swept his hand at the chairs around a small table. "Yes."

Nevin sat down and leaned forward on his elbows, studying the youth who took a chair opposite him. An unlit branch of candles and a bottle of red wine with a pair of glasses flanking it sat in the center of the table. Nevin wondered who had been here last to drink with the youth, deciding after a moment's consideration that he probably shared it with the nibari who sometimes spent the night with him. "May I?"

Isranon immediately poured them both a glass. "What did you want to discuss?"

Nevin rolled the wine around on his tongue. It was very good wine. Aisha had given Isranon a bottle of her best vintage. "What I keep seeing in your face."

"Why are there no gods for me?"

Nevin had expected to have that delayed talk about Troyes and the question caught him off guard. The boy had always stayed away from such subjects and Nevin suspected it came from his father's teachings. Isranon was an odd mix of experience and naiveté, of courage and vulnerability. Some things had changed about him, but not nearly as much as Nevin had expected. "Are you asking me as a lawgiver or as a friend?"

"Both."

Nevin heard the tiny catch in Isranon's voice. "Most lycans are neutrals, as you know. We worship and pray to the ancestors to intervene on our behalf. I have no personal knowledge of much that lies beyond this valley, but only such records as we have kept. It may well be that some of our folk have turned to the gods and it may be that they have not. That would be a private choice. There's a Willodarian priest, Tempest Anstey who has a shrine on the east side, and some of our people go to services there."

"I'm talking about me, Nevin. Did my family go to hell despite all of their kindness and gentleness?"

Nevin nodded, pulling at his split upper lip. "It is the belief of the lawgivers that all sa'necari born go either to the nethergod's hells of punishment or to those of the Hellgod himself who rewards his servants for what we would term their misdeeds. It is much a matter of how they died that determines which one trapped their souls."

"Then what was the use? What was the use for all that my family suffered for their belief?" Isranon's voice started to break, his eyes filled, and the last part of his statement came out in a croaking whisper. "Generation after generation hunted down and killed because they would not participate in the rites, their powers barely formed because of it. What was the use?"

Nevin rose and wrapped his arms around the youth, holding him tightly and listening to him sob. Nevin waited until the worse was over before speaking again. "I cannot believe that a truly just god, as they say the Gods of Light are, and even the nethergod is, would condemn a good mon on the basis of what he was born alone. Now what set this off?"

"Troyes. I want to kill him. Those feelings make me ashamed. And yet he will not stop touching me at every chance. My body fills me with such revulsion when he does that. I did not want to say anything."

"It's okay, pup. It's okay. I already knew." Nevin almost suggested nesting with him. The lycans were into non-sexual comfort nesting, especially among the bachelor males, and the comfort of bodies, of touch was important to him. But Nevin no longer trusted himself with Isranon, for holding him then, the scarred wolf realized that he had fallen in love with the youth that Isranon had become. And that was wrong. The mentor should not fall in love with the student.

\* \* \* \*

Merissa curled up on her bed, staring out the window. "Isranon," she sighed.

When she was away from Troyes, she wondered at what she was doing by spending nearly every night in his bed, slipping in after the household slept and out again before it woke. He was always snide with her if she missed a night other than on her moons and he could Read her body to see if she was lying about them.

Isranon had caught her a second time and the pain in his eyes had hurt her.

Troyes entered without bothering to knock and she looked up at him. He was dressed for riding. "Get your clothes on. I have something to tell you, but not here."

Merissa closed her curtains and dropped her nightgown, going to her closet and selecting a split skirt and blouse. Troyes ran his eyes over her hungrily and she flushed.

"Don't wear anything underneath," he told her.

Merissa nodded. When Troyes took her riding it was simply to find a safe place beyond the house where he could get inside her again. She wanted to weep. This was not at all what she had expected a love affair to be like. He gave her no choice in their coupling, and it always took him so long to spill his seed that he left her tender inside. Day after day until it felt as she could hardly bear to walk.

Troyes fingered her between the legs as she stepped into the skirt and then bit her on the nipple. "Dress quickly. The horses are already saddled."

Then he settled into a chair to watch her dress.

The myn were already out with the herds when Troyes and Merissa finally walked into the barn. He swung her up into the saddle, then mounted and rode out into the yard.

"Going riding again?"

Merissa started at her father's voice. She had thought him to be out with others. "Yes, father. I don't like riding alone, you know. Troyes was kind enough to offer to go with me."

Claw frowned deeply, his brushy black brows drawing together. "Used to be Isranon."

"Isranon has other things on his mind," Merissa said.

"Your daughter is safe with me," Troyes said, his lip curled into a sneer. "Safer than with that half-a-mon."

"That half-a-mon has honor. What do you have, sa'necari?"

Troyes dipped his shoulders. "Ethics."

"Then see that you observe them with my daughter." Claw turned away and stalked into the house.

Merissa felt a rise of tears and fought them back, her shoulders slumping in dejection. She followed Troyes beyond the pastures and turned onto a path that ran along beneath the edges of the forest. The snow season was melting toward spring and bare ground showed in widening patches of brown and tan among the scattered piles of lingering white.

"I am not hurting you, Merissa," Troyes said when they were out of sight of the house. "I am merely making a woman of you."

Merissa turned her head away from him. "I don't want to be a woman."

Troyes laughed. "That's inane! You became a woman the minute my rod of possession pierced you."

The terms he used with her were changing, becoming harsher over the last weeks. "Then I am yours."

"Of course you're mine." He found the copse of spruce and evergreen he favored and dismounted. Troyes helped her down. "Stretch out. Make yourself comfortable."

Merissa's breath shuddered through her. She was beginning to hate riding where she had once loved it. She lay back among the pine boughs and waited for him. Troyes sat cross-legged beside her, stroking her body.

"I want you to come with me when I leave in the spring. Will you?"

"I – I–"

"Oh, I know I'm arrogant and demanding, even harsh. But I love you, Merissa."

"I love you, Troyes," she replied and wondered if that was truth, because even as she said it, she thought of Isranon.

"I want to marry you at the King's Court in Chazkar. You are very beautiful. More beautiful than any of the King's ladies. You will have beautiful gowns and jewels."

Merissa felt dizzy at the images spinning through her mind. He was offering her her childhood dreams. "Troyes–"

"I want you, Merissa, more than anyone else. I want you to bear my children and we will raise them to great power. Say yes."

"Yes."

Troyes gave her a long, satisfied smile and crawled over her. "I love you, Merissa." Then he began to push her dress up.

## CHAPTER NINE

### HOON'S VALLEY

Mephistis spent two weeks at Linden's before leaving for Hoon's estates. He kept one and sometimes both Linden and Quellyn in his bed at all times. His stamina was tremendous and, when the week ended, he suspected he had left at least one of them with a little gift growing inside them. He would have liked to remain long enough to be certain, for he desperately craved an heir of his body. However, the longer they stayed the more likely that they would be discovered. He and Margren had been happy when she conceived. But their unborn children were dead now.

They took enough full preserving bottles to keep their appetites assuaged – Hoon wanted to leave no sign of their passage, especially bodies – and traveled in Hoon's large black coach. The coach was left behind at a border estate owned by Hoon through a proxy company, entering the gorge on foot.

Lord Hoon's estates and holdings bordered Norendel, the Valley of Carliff the Mad Lich, on the north by way of a narrow, bottlenecked gorge and Shaurone on the south by an equally narrow gorge. It was that geographical feature that made the Sharani pass him by when they swept through Waejontor towards the end of the last war, overrunning two-thirds of the realm. Lord Hoon himself had been sneaking into Shaurone for centuries. Hoon had seduced Linden's family into the service of Waejontor three generations back. Her grandma'aram was the disinherited eldest daughter of a Mar'ajan of Dovane and ripe for Hoon's persuasions when they came. Now Linden's guesthouse had become a waystation for guests such as Hoon and Mephistis, part of the underground highway for spies and sleepers.

The new growth forest at the edge of Danae gave out onto an open meadow dotted with chunks of rock and strewn with scattered clusters of boulders. Here and there the dead trunks of trees that had burned twenty years ago during the war with Shaurone when this was a battle field still remained, not yet completely rotted, sprinkled through the forest and across the plain it had once covered. To the west the cliffs rose, marking the descent into the bottleneck gorge that was the only passage into Hoon's valley. Layers of sediment and rock made alternating patterns on the cliff walls like a weaver's design of irregular stripes. Grass tufts and scrubby bushes thrust out from the sides like green whiskers. The floor of the gorge was thickly strewn with rock and boulders. An attacker would have been forced to fight on foot here, as the ground was too rough for horses. Only a man or a goat could have dealt with the rubble that washed down from the cliffsides each year. It was one of those things that had kept Hoon safe from Shaurone: the Sharani depended heavily on their cavalry and horse archers, although they also had longbowmyn. The very narrowness worked against the last group as well as the first two. It was an area that was far easier to defend, than to attack.

Hoon led Mephistis and his two companions, Margren and Bodramet, through the night and allowed them to camp at dawn within the mouth of the gorge. He shared out blood from the bottles. Linden had filled their saddlebags when they left with a large supply of blood, which they transferred to back packs at Hoon's estate. However, Hoon had broken into his own private stock and brought along several bottles of better vintages: blended sylvan bloods, troll and demon blood – an assortment he shared sparingly.

Mephistis immediately dropped to the ground when Hoon called a halt in the mouth of the gorge that morning. At midnight he had begun to hurt in his muscles and bones, and long before the first light of dawn a burning sensation had started in his extremities and along his spine. He had found himself leaning heavily upon Margren, letting her bear most of his weight. Her undead form was very strong and handled him easily.

Hoon studied his face carefully, searching every aspect of it and then grasped his wrist to Read him. Then he eyed Bodramet, clearly calculating what possible threat that one posited before speaking. "It's progressing faster than I expected."

Mephistis schooled the fear out of his face. "Do something," he said in a languid voice with the merest hint of threat.

Hoon unshouldered his pack and took out a preserving bottle that had green lines of power along it in addition to the gold. Mephistis had never seen anything like this one, and he had seen many things, both at his father's and his ma'aram's courts. The vampire fished for a glass and measured three fingers of the liquid into it. He resealed the bottle and returned it to his pack after handing the glass to Mephistis.

"What is this?" Mephistis sniffed at it, then tongued it. The blood had a blend of sweet, tart and salt, indicating drugs and other substances had been added.

"Sanguine Rose. Only my people remember how to make it. It will ease you."

"You're Lemyari, aren't you?" Mephistis said, sipping the blood cocktail.

Hoon smiled. "That should be self-evident. Sunlight has not bothered me since the day I was turned. I retain all my mage-gifts from my days as a living mon." He flexed his fingers, extending them to the little circle and brought forth his claws from beneath his primary nails with venom beading on their tips.

Bodramet looked uncomfortable at those claws. It was said that the venom became more potent with age and the oldest of them were reputed to have slain yuwenghau with it, the young rogue gods and demi-gods with no worshipers who served as divine knights errant. Many claimed that Lemyari were not true vampires at all, but some kind of undead demon. Or perhaps not truly undead, but merely transformed by death.

A potent warmth beyond blood or liquor gilded Mephistis' awareness and body as the pain receded. *Sanguine Rose*, he decided, *is something I like*. He laid his head in Margren's lap and she stroked his brow.

"Sleep for a little," Hoon told them. "I will keep watch. The Sharani rarely come here. They fear my valley and its entrance."

"I love you, Margren," Mephistis said, reaching up to stroke her face once before falling into drugged slumber.

Hoon roused them at twilight and they moved on again. Mephistis walked alongside Margren with Hoon leading and Bodramet trailing. When Mephistis began to falter again, Hoon stopped long enough to dose him with the Sanguine Rose and then kept them walking deeper. The ground became rougher as rocks became boulders and the boulders became larger. Soon they were scrambling between the rocks as often as not, with no discernable footpath to lead them through or make their travel easier. An hour before dawn they finally broke through to a narrow path and Hoon pointed toward the cliffs. Mephistis just barely saw the outline of a cave mouth.

"There. We will get horses there," Hoon told them. "Then it will be easier upon you, my prince."

A sentry, concealed by the rocks around the cave mouth and a tamarack tree, emerged as they neared and hailed them. "My lord! It is good that you return."

Mephistis watched the male, his eyes narrowing. The one was human and had the look of Waejontor on his dark skin and hair, the full lips.

The cave was a huge cavern with a small guard station concealed within it. Myn walked smartly about their tasks with harnesses jingling. A corral for the horses stood to their right and a long barracks to their left. Beyond that, out of reach of any who might come at them, were storage sheds and barns. They walked down the middle toward a house built into the side with a bailey for defense. The outer wall was grey stone with streaks of white and orange shot through it. The gates were opened without a word by the guards there and Hoon led them inside.

The main room of the house had marble floors and wood paneled walls stained a dark color. Tapestries of various types of fanged creatures cavorting or taking victims adorned the walls. Many of the creatures were so strange that Mephistis could not identify them. One that was repeated in many scenes was a small female creature, pale skinned with a heavy head of black hair and a small tightly curled tail between her shapely buttocks. That one was always depicted nude and her face was never more than half shown, usually biting into the neck bone of a far larger creature such as a demon or troll while her claws reached for their eyes.

Hoon's servant waited for his master's orders, standing stiffly at attention. The

vampire flicked his hand at him. "Four full meals. Bring me the loveliest depnane you have for our feeding."

The servant bowed himself out. Bodramet's eyes gleamed with satisfaction at Hoon's hospitality and Margren smiled. Mephistis seemed almost not to hear as he went from tapestry to tapestry, tracing that female creature with his fingers. "What is she?"

Hoon poured Mephistis another measure of Sanguine Rose and set it on a large table near the hearth. "Do not become enamored of that one, prince," Hoon cautioned. "That is the demon-eater that slew your ancestor, mighty Waejonan."

Mephistis covered his startlement by turning his head away and walking to the table. He sat down and sipped the drink. "Then the legends are true? There really was a demon-eater that bit through Waejonan's spine?"

"Yes. And some claim she is still out there. It is said that after she killed Waejonan, she developed an appetite for sa'necari and made large herds of them her blood-slaves. She drinks from them heavily. Her very presence causes her slaves physical and psychic anguish. When she tires of her toys she destroys them. But most often they simply do not have the stamina to survive her presence and feedings. She is a relentless hunter. Once she marks someone for taking, they cannot escape her. No one has ever escaped her in 4,000 years. You can run, but you cannot hide from her."

Despite the warmth the blood cocktail gave him, Mephistis shivered. "Does she have a name?"

"Most likely, but I have never found it."

The servant returned with four females, all with the death's head brand on their foreheads indicating that they could be slain in the course of a meal. Bodramet rose from his chair and started toward them, but Hoon gestured him to wait. "The prince has the first selection and Margren second."

Bodramet shrugged and stepped back. Mephistis looked up from the table and measured the four for a moment, before selecting a slender, high-breasted young one. He led her to a couch and made her kneel between his parted legs in the nibari position. She trembled hard, but said nothing. *Spelled, drugged, or well-trained*. Just because a depnane was sent for did not mean they would be killed and eaten, only that there was a possibility of it. Mephistis stroked her head for a moment, nuzzled her neck as if he were taking a nibari, and then ripped into her, tearing out the artery so that his tired body could feed more easily. He scarcely heard the screaming from the other three meals.

\* \* \* \*

The City of the Dead had once been called Sweetwillow in the Valley of Errilyn, but no one remembered that any longer. Not since the night Hoon took it from a lord of the Rowan lineage. Centuries past this had been part of Shaurone, but Hoon and his undead had swept through and it had fallen. The survivors had been interbred with Hoon's nibari and depnane. The depnane were frequently culls and steers from the nibari herds, and captives taken in Shaurone and Norendel, or anyone who chanced to anger the ruling lord – in this case, Hoon. None of the original stock remained, not even in the villages surrounding it, which also belonged to Hoon.

The high walls had been built into the side of the cliffs and then swept around in a well-planned octagon. Broad battlements topped those walls and a huge oak and iron gate stood before them on the south side. There was another gate to the north, just as strong. In five centuries no one had attacked it, no one had threatened Hoon since he took it, not even jealous sa'necari who resented seeing a vampire possessing such a great stronghold and so much power. A token force walked the walls and when the small band was sighted, the gates were swung open to receive them.

The houses of the city were rundown, many of them windowless. The variety of undead making their way along the thoroughfares in the waning light ran the gamut from revenants, ghouls and skeletons to lesser bloods – those primitive vampires who could not bear the light of day – Lemyari and other vampiric royals. A handful of nibari hastened through the crowds, trying to complete their errands and get home to their masters before it got any later, for in the later hours the less thinking variety of undead often failed to respect another's property. There were also sa'necari mixed in, often accompanied by trolls of many species. The crowds gave way before Hoon and many spoke, welcoming him back.

Mephistis caught the strange look in Margren's eyes. The more rotted forms of undead appeared to trouble her. He reached across the horse and patted her hand. "You were never like that, my love. You were beautiful even in death. And now, so long as you feed, you will never be."

"I hate my mother. I hate my sister," Margren muttered.

"Your mother is dead. I promise your sister soon will be."

"How can she be alive, when I am undead?" Margren snarled. "It isn't fair."

Mephistis sighed. Margren was different somehow, more edgy. She had been that way since he took Linden and Quellyn into his bed, despite his explanations about needing an heir of his body. He hoped he had gotten one. He would inquire in a few months. "Margren..."

\* \* \* \*

When Mephistis left, a piece of him remained behind, firmly lodged in Linden's belly. She kyndied the child to Quellyn without informing Mephistis, the magical

working that allowed one woman to pass her embryo to her na'halaef. The Sharani required three parents to produce viable offspring: sire, bloodmother and wombmother. A child then partook of the genetic inheritance of all three parents with the wombmother, ma'aramlasah, determining the gender. Unkyndied children were born Azdrin, sterile, dis-enfranchised androgynes. A small vengeance by omission.

"Hoon knows what he did," Linden said softly, watching the vampire lord's black coach disappear down the street. "There will be an accounting."

"This child will be sa'necari also?"

"Yes. And if Hoon doesn't get him, one of these children will. Unnecessary probably. If I were betting on the ultimate predator, it would be Hoon. But having two sa'necari-born children, especially from the Waejonan bloodline, will be insurance."

"And how do we explain to Tomyrilen that her soon-to-be brother is also her nephew?"

Linden stared at her mate and then laughed bitterly. "She won't care."

\* \* \* \*

Margren wandered about the castle. There were an incredible number of nibari here and depnane also. It made her mouth water to watch them going about their work. Some were simple servants, cleaning and waiting upon the masters as well as feeding them. Others were dressed like highborn ladies in soft gowns and bright colors. It made her wonder to see them. Lemyari, sa'necari, and other royals were the only undead allowed within the castle itself. Those here were reserved for the masters.

She made her way to a huge landing with couches and chairs upon it, but no tables. A small troll crouched upon the floor, licking spots of blood off the mosaic tiles. Then Margren guessed that this was a feeding place, built for comfort. A pair of wide staircases made an elegant swept along the sides, descending to the main floor and the great halls. Margren smoothed her blue robes and went down. Voices talking and laughing drew her into a large side hall. There she found vampires and sa'necari scattered about in little clusters. Tables could be found here as well as couches and chairs. Several of those well-dressed nibari sat with the masters drinking wine, while others knelt between their masters' legs in the proper position of yielding up their gifts. The masters fed, drank wine, and visited. Some played chess and others played Togly with stones, cards, and figures on cloth draped over a large table. Then Margren's eye was drawn to an amazing sight in one of the corners that sent a delighted shiver along her arms. A huge stonetroll sat there with four vampires feeding from him while he moaned, "yes" as if in the throes of passion.

Margren walked over and stared.

"That's Juqwanch. He's addicted to being fed on and with a troll's constitution it gives him no problems."

Margren turned and faced Bodramet. Her face flamed. "You failed me."

Bodramet grabbed her arm. "Let's talk about this upstairs."

"No."

"Oh, yes. You'll see I haven't. But this is a private matter."

Margren cocked her head with a pouting look. "It had better be good, I still want to eat you."

"There is eating and then there is eating."

Margren allowed him to guide her up to his rooms. He propelled her inside and barred the door before propelling her into the bedroom.

"Isranon is alive," Margren growled. "You promised me."

"Troyes intends to rite him in Claw's valley and use it to provoke an incident. I arranged that for you, my love. Now get undressed and reward me."

\* \* \* \*

Lord Hoon's tower room rose high above everything except the mountains the castle pressed against. The chamber was filled with heavy black furniture and hung with more tapestries of the demon-eater. Mephistis looked at every one of them and could still not discern her face. A black pentagram against crimson dominated the mosaic floor tile; runes of death, blood, and undeath magics filled the angles of the inverted star. It had always fascinated Mephistis how such a simple device could be tuned to any kind of magic and most mages and witches used it.

"Can you contact your agent in Vorgensburg? Mind to mind?"

"Yes."

"Good. Tell him to scry you." Hoon took two things from the desk, a human bone circle with a skull woven of human hairs and gut in the center and a simple mirror.

"Is that?"

"Yes. It's the one got me past Abelard's wards the night I killed him." Five hundred years ago he had gluttoned on Abelard's blood and life. He savored the memory. The little enchantary fetish had been a gift from Gylorean Galee, the vampire who had turned him – a vampire so ancient her powers rivaled the gods themselves – and

Hoon was the first child of her blood. He had received the fullness of her gift when she made him. Hoon laid the mirror on the floor and the artifact on the mirror. "Now, mind to mind, then draw your connection through the mirror and I will send him this. I expect it returned when the work is done."

## CHAPTER TEN

### CEDARBIRD

Big, good-looking, red-haired, easy-going Omer Wheeler with his dramatic cheekbones, strong jawline and deeply cleft chin had almost as good a reputation among the prostitutes, pimps, and madams of the Bought Ladies Quarter as Tagalong Smith and for different reasons. As one of Aejs' main myn among the drivers, he was paid well, raking in bonuses for small side jobs requiring tact, diplomacy, and outright cunning so he always had plenty of money to spend. He dressed well when he went into the Quarter in a buttoned shirt of soft chestnut wool and matching trousers ending in knee high black boots polished to a fine gloss. A pair of long knives rode at his hips, hung from a wide, black belt and a heavy emerald great cloak covered him.

Most males who came to the quarter had a 'get it in, get it off, get it out' attitude. Omer was completely different: he made the ladies happy. He made certain that they enjoyed him as much as he enjoyed them. He paid for their time and brought them small presents as well. But even more important he actually talked to them, listened, and remembered what they had said. He always paid for more hours than he required to satisfy his physical needs so that he could get it all in. Sometimes he took them to dinner at fine establishments. The madams especially loved him for he brought them presents also, talking and flirting, making them feel young and beautiful again. The pimps respected him, and more than one owed him favors; Omer knew his way around the mean streets, had a good ear for the undercurrents of gossip, and knew how to use the little tidbits of information he picked up to best advantage as well as being handy with his blades.

There was a certain madam, Janine, who slept with him at every opportunity believing that she had seduced him when Omer knew it was the other way around. Janine was in her fifties with long glossy white hair, a striking woman, buxom and wasp-waisted. Omer was the first man in many, many years to make love to her so skillfully that she cried out in ecstasy at his touch. Janine knew that Omer saw other women in the Quarter, but she did not care so long as he came back to her. Janine, also, knew nearly everything that went on in the Quarter, down to its darkest secrets because that was how she survived in rough times and how she protected her girls.

Omer went to Janine first when Becca told him what Aejs wanted. He arrived early knowing that while most of the girls would still be sleeping, Janine would be awake attending to the day to day things that kept the brothel running smoothly. She took

better care of her girls than any other madam in the city. The daytime maid opened the door to him wearing a demure long black dress and white bib apron, a feather duster clutched in one hand. She smiled brightly at seeing him and for a brief moment was almost pretty, though her nose was a shade too strong and her lips a bit too wide. Omer caught her free hand, kissing her fingers lightly with a small bow, which he had learned by closely observing the nobles with their ladies and then practicing before a mirror.

She giggled girlishly as she took his cloak.

"Lovely as always, Emilyn," he said smoothly. "I've come to see the fairest of them all. Is she awake?"

"She's taking breakfast in the upstairs parlor. You know the way?"

"Need you ask?"

Emilyn giggled again as Omer swept past her, turning to sigh softly to herself with her eyes on his well-shaped buttocks. She would have climbed into bed with him in an instant if he would ever ask; but he never did.

\* \* \* \*

Omer entered the parlor without knocking, startling Janine who nearly dropped her teacup. She wore nothing but a silken dressing robe, a pale blue wisp of a garment that matched her eyes. The fire had been built up and the room was very warm. Janine sprang to her feet with a delighted cry, rushing to him. As she reached him he pulled a package from a pocket of his cloak, pressing it into her hands.

"What's this?" Janine asked. She had a warm throaty voice and the last traces of a guttural accent, suggesting that her origins were in the east beyond the great plains of Murshay'di. Omer loved the hungry, sensuality of her face and the gliding, cat-like way she moved.

"A very special gift, my dearest girl." He bent to kiss the top of her head, her forehead, and her nose, finally her lips deep and lingering.

She trembled violently, almost dropping the package as she pressed herself against him. "I want you."

"And I you. But I want to see your eyes when you open the package first."

Janine smiled and sat down on the couch nearest the dining table. She removed the violet paper in an eager rush, then stared in delighted surprise at a necklace worthy of a queen: Braided silver set with rubies, jade and scarlet pearls. "However did you come by this?"

"Don't you like it?"

"Oh," she cried, looking up at him now in wonderment. "I love it, but it's a queen's ransom. However did you afford it?"

Omer settled beside her, his hand dropping to her knee to squeeze it affectionately. "Well, as you no doubt know, Aeijys is back. She called me up to the study to discuss a bonus I was owed, asked me how I wanted it. I told her I wanted something special for the loveliest lady in all of Vorgensburg. So she dipped into the great wyrm's hoard and gave me this."

"Omer, it is wonderful. It is the most wonderful thing anyone has ever given me in my entire life."

Omer took the necklace and clasped it around her neck. If things went sour that necklace alone would more than buy her and her girls' way to safety. The possibility that flight might become necessary if Janine helped him was a point he made to Aeijys. She had clearly taken those concerns to heart when she gave him that piece. As he lifted Janine in his arms, the belt came loose from the robe letting it slip open to reveal her well-tended breasts. He knew she periodically hired a mender to tighten them whenever they started to sag. She kept herself as young as it was magically possible to do without illusion. He appreciated that as he mouthed one sweet nipple. Omer carried her into the private bedroom behind the parlor. A large curtained bed waited for them in the corner. He brushed aside the curtains, settling Janine comfortably on the bed. Omer stroked her womanhood, feeling how wet and ready she was. The ceiling was mirrored and Janine liked to watch him playing with her clitoris; watch him enter and then emerge glistening with her juices as he pumped.

"Do you want it now or should we play first?" Omer knew well that it often took more work to satisfy a woman than it did a man: women were such amazingly intricate creatures.

"Now," she moaned as he played with the delicate tissues, probing inside her. "Now. Please, now." She reached down, pulling her lips wider, enticing him to enter.

Omer opened his pants, lifting his member out. The fact that he did not disrobe was a gesture of dominance that Janine encouraged. In day-to-day life Janine ruled, in bed she preferred the opposite. He was huge and hard: too large for some of the smaller ladies. He knew he sometimes hurt Janine without meaning to simply because of his size, but she liked it that way. She cried out in pain and ecstasy as he pushed into her, wrapping her legs around his buttocks and pressing him to go harder and faster. Omer responded with the deep, relentless rhythm Janine loved. Her pelvis moved in time to his thrusts, her vagina sucking at him. His lips closed over her nipple, biting and pulling. He stroked and squeezed and licked until her body was slick with his saliva. When violent trembling and a small, involuntary cough from Janine told him she was losing control of her body with the intensity of the coming

orgasm, Omer reared back, going his deepest, hardest, fastest – taking her completely. She came as he exploded within her.

Omer dropped onto the sheets and lay stroking her.

"So what are you doing in the Quarter?" she asked, lazily unbuttoning his shirt, pulling it out of his pants. "I know you did not come just to see me. You always have three or four reasons for everything you do, my fine stallion."

Omer sighed exaggeratedly. "You know me that well now, Janine?"

She laughed, reaching for his cock again, stroking it while he stroked her. "I've always known you that well. Now out with it or in with it or both, my stallion."

He pushed himself up on his elbow and kissed her. "Both."

"So? What is it?"

"I'm looking for a mon named Dinger."

She quit stroking him and rolled away on her side, thinking. "My dear, fine stallion," she said, turning back to him. "Dinger is a very, very dangerous mon. He works for Cedarbird. If you should find him he might kill you. He would certainly kill me if he should by any means – and he has many, not all of them human – find out it was I told you what he is and where to find him."

"I would die before I told him."

"That is what I fear. That you would die."

"That's my job. Aejsys says find him, bring him. So I do it. You are the only person I have asked. If I ask all over about him, then he will become aware of me before I am aware of him. That will put me in danger. However, if you help me now then he will not know."

"So be it. His full name is Arlethan Dinger. The word on the streets is that he is not just an apostate priest, but that he is a necromancer, maybe even a sa'necari. When one of Cedarbird's women starts to lose her looks or lets herself get pregnant by forgetting to use the moon oils or for any of a thousand reasons should anger Cedarbird, he gives them to Dinger. Dinger, it is said, takes mortgiefan from them, then preserves their bodies to satisfy his lusts until he gets another one."

Omer dropped back onto the bed and lay there in silence for a very long time, wrapped in a nearly overwhelming sense of foreboding. If Dinger was everything Janine claimed, and she had never been wrong before, then the danger to his wounded liege-lord and the household was far greater than anyone expected. An attack could come at any time, a sa'necari did have to wait for more resources, he

was a very deadly and unpredictable element added into an already dangerous mix.

"Have I chilled your very bones, my stallion? Are you man enough to have another go with me in spite of it."

Omer forced aside his troubling thoughts as he rose on his elbows to kiss her deeply, his open shirt brushing across her nipples. "I will always be man enough for another go, Janine."

\* \* \* \*

Around the time that Omer was dressing to go to the Quarter, Josh was pushing open the gate to Branch's little enclave. After more than a week of brooding, he had finally come to confront Branch about Skree's revelations. He meant to come earlier, yet had not found the courage.

Josh sensed the residue of dark magic about the house; it lay thick over the yard like an oily unseen spill of contamination. He shivered inside his coat and cloak and not from the cold. He paused beside the totem pole, pressing his hand to the out-stretched raven's wing. Then he saw the dead birds, seven ravens scattered before the doorstep. He knelt and picked one up. There was no mark on the bird. It had not died from a physical assault. He laid it back where it had fallen, fear and worry kindling in his heart. He raced up the steps and pounded on the door.

Bluewings let Josh in, her eyes were deeply shadowed, and bruised looking. The corners of her mouth sagged.

"What happened?" Josh asked.

"Bad things. Very bad things. Something evil got past Grandfather's wards. It killed the ravens. Tried to kill us all. My brothers..." Her face twisted in distress, and she crumpled. Josh caught her, lifting her into his arms. He turned about, scanning the large room. There were four blanket-covered bodies near the fire. Branch, a bright blanket around his shoulders, sat staring into the flames with his back to Josh.

"Take her upstairs," he said without turning. "Put her to bed."

Josh carried Bluewings up the plank steps onto the upper tier. The large, single room had cedar weavings on two sides instead of walls. The two wooden walls on the side and at the back were hung with bright, cedar strip weavings in geometric patterns. Six simple beds of straw covered by blankets were set along the walls, separated by folding screens which had been knocked over. Josh laid Bluewings down, felt for a pulse, found it, and dragged blankets over her. They had played together as children, rushing about the strand or digging for clams. He felt distressed and uneasy looking down at her. He tucked her in and kissed her cheek. A tremor of anger ran through him: Whoever did this would pay.

He rejoined Branch by the fire, his eyes drawn to the bodies time and again as he tried to concentrate on the old shaman. Josh shuddered as he stared at the blanket-wrapped bodies. He squatted beside Branch, looking into his haggard and drawn face. The old shaman appeared to be in a state close to shock. Branch and Bluewings needed more help than Josh could provide.

"It entered," Branch said, sounding distant and unfocused. "Its master attacked me directly, mind to mind, magic to magic. Bluewings joined her powers to mine and we cast out the master, sent away his creature. But while we struggled with him, his creature killed my grandsons."

Josh went to the bodies, flicking back the blankets. The first body set his stomach heaving. The man had fang marks on his throat, defense wounds on his arms, his stomach had been ripped open, and there was nothing left in it—just an empty cavity. The next two were the same. The last one had only the marks on his throat where the blood had been drained away.

"Why hasn't anyone from the village come to help you?"

Branch simply shook his head and stared into the flames. Josh left, going to the nearest house. He knocked on the door, but no one answered. Finally he opened the door. The remains of a gutted child fell across the threshold. Josh spun around, dropping from the doorstep to his knees in the snow, vomiting. When his stomach was empty and he began to recover a little, he knocked on every door, receiving no answers, but this time he did not go in, he knew what he would find: Of all the small trading village only Branch and Bluewings survived.

\* \* \* \*

Before Skree re-entered his life, Josh would have gone straight to Aejs with his news. Now he went to Skree. He found his godfather sitting in the parlor of their small suite. Skree started to greet him in a friendly manner, caught the haunted look in Josh's face, and asked simply, "What has happened?"

Tears started in Josh's eyes and ran freely down his face as he shook.

Skree rose and settled Josh into a chair at the little table. "Take a deep breath and let it out slowly, then speak."

Josh nodded and after a few breaths was able to begin. The triton listened to his story in troubled silence. When Josh had finished, Skree rose and fetched his cloak.

"Do not speak to Aejs about this until I have investigated. I must assess what we are confronted by. I will bring Bluewings and Branch here for their safety."

\* \* \* \*

Skree entered the Kwaklahmyn compound at mid-day. He smelled the dark residue, which Josh had described to him and recognized it. "Sa'necari," he hissed.

The triton went to Branch's house first, pushed the door open cautiously, and went in. He saw Branch, crossed the room, and dropped to his knees by the old Shaman. "Old mon," he said, "Your grandson, Ash, is safe. I made certain of it before I left the tavern. He fell asleep in the winter quarters sitting room listening to stories."

Branch sighed heavily and nodded. "I do not know how it passed my wards," he said dully, his eyes glazed with shock.

"The sa'necari has slain your village."

"They are all dead?"

"Josiah found no survivors. Do you know who this sa'necari is?"

"Dinger. It was Dinger."

"Did you know that he was sa'necari?"

Branch shook his head. "Before last night? No."

"I will gather your dead into a single house and then fire it lest they rise."

Branch nodded. Skree took his wrist and Read him, finding that he was in state verging on deep psychic shock, his magic spent. Then he went upstairs and Read Bluewings. She stirred at his touch, opening her eyes, "Skree?"

"Josiah sent me. Your village is slain. When I am done here, you and your grandfather must come away with me. I will take you to a place of safety."

"Thank you," she whispered weakly.

Skree left then, going from house to house, finding as Josh suspected no survivors. From the tiniest infant to the oldest crone, they were all dead. He took Branch's grandsons and placed them in the house last. Then he emptied the barrels of whale oil over everything and set it burning. Darkness had come by the time he finished. He wrapped Bluewings and Branch in blankets, lifted them both to his shoulders, and started back. He would settle them among the guards and drivers in the converted warehouse. Then he intended to speak with Aejs about what had transpired.

\* \* \* \*

The old house rose up two stories in a graveyard of ruined houses, a section hit once too often by raiders. There might still be people in some of them, derelicts and others who had fallen through the cracks of life, illicit tenants of desperation. Omer

always figured he would end up like them when he got old – his father had. Fear of it used to come calling in the utter stillness of the wee hours before dawn, binding his stomach in nauseous twists of panic, suggesting he put a knife to his wrists before he lived too long. Since Aeijys found him, those nights had become rarer, but he still had them.

The house was supposed to be abandoned. It looked that way to Omer. The shutters on the windows were all broken and the front door hung half off its hinges. Wind blown snow was piled deep against the sides. Janine had gone out, pulling in some favors to get him the address while he waited in her chambers. She made him promise not to go in alone. He knew he should have kept it, gone back for at least his buddy Raim, but he had a gut feeling that time was something he did not have. Janine told him that sometimes the bolder of the street children, mostly orphans, went in, and never came out. Dinger did not live in the house, he lived under it. Or so Janine told him.

Omer went up the front steps, kicking the snow away as he went. He slipped cautiously through the door, which squeaked loudly despite his best efforts. Floorboards creaked and felt ready to give beneath his feet in several places. There was no possibility of walking quietly. He paused, letting his eyes get accustomed to the dark. A loud chorus of chittering began above his head. He looked up to see what seemed like hundreds of gleaming red eyes through holes in the disintegrating ceiling.

A cold chill ran up his arms. *Bats. It's just bats .*

He moved on, past rats nesting in the ruins of an old couch, into the kitchen. At the end of the kitchen he found a stair leading up, but he was looking for something leading down. He walked past them into a hallway. One door to the left opened on a large pantry. An odor of rotting flesh seemed to rise from beneath the floorboards. It had to be fresh to smell so strongly in the cold weather. Omer gagged, pulling the edge of his great cloak around his mouth and nose for a moment just to catch his breath. Then he let it go and knelt. The odor worsened the lower he got. It was definitely coming from beneath the flooring. He pulled out a lucifer and struck it. By its light he found a small hole about the size for a man to put his finger through. The lucifer burned down and he dropped it, stepping on it to be certain it was out. Then he had to let his eyes get used to the dark again while he felt around for the hole.

Omer found it; opening a trap door revealing a narrow stair. The odor was even worse now. With his every instinct screaming not to, he went down. A candle burned on a long table, giving out a feeble light. Some one lived here –*if you could call it living* , he added grimly. He turned about and in the thin flickering light made out a long, vaguely human shape lying in a corner. When the person did not move, Omer retrieved the candle and looked closer. It was a woman lying face down and she was very dead. The winter chill had preserved her for the nonce. He turned her over. She had long black hair and a face that might have been pretty if she had been

alive. Her dress had been slit open to her knees. He counted six stab wounds in her stomach and chest, crusted with frozen blood. There was no blood on the dress. He parted her thighs and found a thick coating of frozen semen. It could have been a simple rape murder, but a tightening in his gut called it mortgiefan. There should have been more blood.

*I should get out of here*, he thought, but went into the next room instead. This room was warmer. There he found sixteen eerily glowing glass tanks, each filled with a foot or more of sand and topped with a heavy wire mesh. He looked closer. Each of them contained a hibernating viper burrowed deep into the sand that he could just barely make out by where the edges of their bodies pressed the glass. All of those he recognized were among the most potently venomous on the continent. Several of them were what he and his fellows called 'ten-steppers' because no one ever got far after being bitten by one. When he got to the last tank he saw that the sand had been disturbed and the viper was missing. He could not explain it, but that empty tank gave him a very bad feeling.

*Okay. I'm going back now. I'll tell Aeijys what I've found and return with some friends.*

As he entered the living room, heading for the front door, he heard movement around him. Someone unshielded a lamp, nearly blinding him. "Should you be here?" a mon's voice demanded. By the light he discerned six shapes, all armed: four men and a pair of unfamiliar women dressed in leather and trousers like some of Aeijys' household. Around him he heard the scrape of steel clearing leather. *When outnumbered*, Omer's father had always told him, *your best defense is a strong offense followed quickly by running.*

Omer whipped out his two long knives, and charged the mon nearest the door. The mon lunged with a sword. Omer crossed his knives, catching the attacking blade and forcing it up and away. He disengaged with a twist, shoving one of his knives into the mon's midsection. Omer jerked his blade free, knocked the collapsing mon aside and slammed through the door. He caught sight of the moon as he raced out into the snow: It had to be near closing time at the Cock and Boar. He extended his stride to a ground eating pace, haunted still by the empty tank even though his own logic dictated that he should have been more concerned about the dead mon.

\* \* \* \*

While Omer visited Janine, Becca set off to see Brother Arlethan. The little schoolroom was located in the converted warehouse next to the Cock and Boar. Most of the warehouse was now dorm style living for the guards and drivers wintering in Vorgensburg, but she had set aside this one small room near the center of the building for the children. It was warmed by a little cast iron stove with a pipe through the roof to take away the smoke, an excellent example of dwarven ingenuity introduced by Tagalong the previous winter, thus making it one of the warmest

rooms in the building. Eight children ranging in age from five to twelve sat at little desks with books and slates. They had embraced the chance at learning warmly, at first just because it got them out of half a day's chores and later because they enjoyed it. Brother Arlethan was very good with the children. Their parents cherished the idea of their learning and it increased their gratitude and loyalty to Aejs for giving their children this opportunity.

The withered old monk with the careworn face and odd hazel, almost true violet, eyes smiled warmly when Becca entered, moving spryly to take her cloak. "What do we say, class?"

"Good Morning, Master Becca," they replied in unison.

"Good morning, children," Becca replied. As the monk reached for her cloak, Becca shook her head. "I'll only be a moment. I was wondering if you might have some books for Lord Aejs to read. She's very bored at the moment." *At least during the daylight*, she added smugly to herself. "Perhaps something on the history of Vorgensburg?"

"Ah! I have just the thing. And perhaps some classics? I could bring them up later? I haven't had the opportunity to greet her in person."

"That sounds nice. Having someone as learned as yourself to talk to would be pleasant also, I'm sure."

"Then I shall come by your office some time after lunch and you will introduce us."

Becca turned and departed, so she did not see the strange twisted travesty that his smile became. She had never asked him if he had a last name, because none of the monks she had known over the years had gone by one, but he had one. She had just left the children alone again with Arlethan Dinger, apostate priest of Kalirion and agent of Thomas Cedarbird.

"My, my, my," he murmured so soft that none of the children could hear him, "when opportunity calls, it definitely calls." Then he went back to teaching, feeling the reassuring presence of the little fetish between his sock and the insole, a gift from his master. He could now take out the mages. His creatures would not be rested enough to call on for another day: they were sleeping off their feast at the Kwaklahmyn trading enclave. However, Dinger had other tools.

\* \* \* \*

Arlethan arrived in the second hour past noon wearing his brown robes and the belt of dangling wooden beads carved like leaves interspersed with various dried seeds typical of a Willodarian monk, carrying a worn black satchel of books. She helped him out of his long wool cloak, threw it over her arm, and led him down the hall to Aejs' rooms.

Aejys lay in bed, looking a bit worn. She started to sit up.

"No need," Arlethan said quickly. "You need your rest, I'm told. So I'll bring them to you."

Becca smiled at his thoughtfulness. "Lord Aejys, let me introduce Brother Arlethan. He's the Willodarian I told you about. The one who's teaching the children."

"We are very fortunate to have you, Brother Arlethan," Aejys said. "The children you have sent up to read have read quite well considering how short a time you have been teaching them, just since early fall I'm told."

"They are very eager to learn and I am happy to teach." He sat his satchel down beside the chair closest to the fireplace. He pulled out four volumes and carried them over to the table. "This is a history of Vorgensburg," he said, patting the top volume happily. "And there are two more that I'll just leave on the chair. Or will six books over burden you too much?"

The thought of more books delighted Aejys. "Six is fine. I'll look at these first and the others later."

"Do you need me to stay and turn the pages for you?"

"No," Aejys told him. "I'm starting to get some feeling back in my fingers. I can handle it. Thank you for offering. You must have better things to do than that."

"As a matter of fact I do, but they would wait if you wished."

"No. Go on. Just leave the others on the chair as you said."

"I will. I surely will." He went back to his satchel, pulling out two books and something else which the books and the angle of the chair concealed; something large and tightly coiled which needed the fire's warmth to awaken from its hibernation. Arlethan knew that Josiah shared her bed and, with any luck, he would be the one to fetch those two books to her. Then he followed Becca out.

\* \* \* \*

Omer arrived at the Cock and Boar, winded and gasping. He glanced about again to see if he had been followed, failed to see anyone in the light of the street lamps, and went in. Little more than a handful of regulars occupied the common room which was slowly filling up again with members of the household seeking seconds from the day's leftovers, especially the pastries, or a last pint before bed which they got at discount since it was from the tavern stores and not the household's.

Raim sighted Omer first and rose to greet him with a frown of concern for he could

tell that his buddy had been running and wondered from what. Raim's frown increased when he got close to Omer. "What's happening?" He touched a small spattering of bloodstains.

"Not mine," Omer told him, looking about. "Where's Becca?"

"In her office. Why?"

"Come on. I'll tell you both at the same time."

\* \* \* \*

Aejys enjoyed the book on the history of Vorgensburg. She had not known about its founding by a small band of shipwrecked sailors who washed up on its shores more than a century ago. Taun had shortened the splints a tiny bit when he realized that she was getting some feeling back just so that she could work on turning pages. He still did not know how much or how little strength or use she would get back and was considering, as he had told her, sending for a touch healer or mender that he knew among his own folk. She knew well that only a full lifemage would ever be able to give her back complete use of her hands, but a little use was better than none and she was starting to feel hopeful again.

Josh had settled on the bed beside her, sliding his arm around her shoulders while she read, listening interestedly to her intermittent remarks on the subject. It took his mind off the horror of that morning. He wondered what was taking Skree so long, for he ached to share his nightmare with Aejys and be comforted as he had been on the bluffs four years ago.

"There are two more books on that chair," she told him, "I think Brother Arlethan said that at least one of those is on Vorgensburg also. Would you get them?"

Josh slid out of bed and was half way there when Aejys heard a sound that chilled her blood then sent a rush of adrenaline to warm it again. Certain types of horned vipers, among the most deadly on the continent, had tiny spines in their scales that allowed the scales to be lifted slightly and then they rubbed them together to make a threatening noise when agitated. "Don't move."

"What is it?" he asked in a hushed voice, looking about.

"Come back here slowly."

Then he heard it, started to turn, and hesitated, his heart hammering. He could not flee without knowing where it was. He could not think. Panic held him and all he could do was remember the gutted child falling across the doorway in the little house on the beach.

*Oh gods, no.* "Come here. Now," she said in a calm, insistent voice. She saw

movement in the chair. Something peered around the edge of the arm. Josh seemed frozen in his tracks. Adrenaline lent her strength and speed; she crossed the room and kicked the chair, spilling two books and the large thick body of a black and scarlet-ringed horned viper onto the floor. It curled quickly and struck at her. She retreated slowly, cautiously facing it, trying to anticipate it. This particular snake was known to chase people. One of the other aspects of Sharani genetics which Ishla Twice-Gendered had played with had been the development of a strong resistance to all but the most potent of natural venoms and poisons, though little to the occult and magical ones. She did not know if it extended to this particular species, for it was not found in Shaurone. But if one of them did get bit, she stood a better chance of surviving it than Josiah.

Josh took a step back and it darted toward him. Aejs sprang, elbowing him out of the way. He stumbled backwards and hit the floor, then scrambled up, grabbing at a chair. Aejs moved between them. The snake struck, biting quickly and holding on. Aejs cried out at the burning pain, caught it between the palms of her splinted hands, and tore it loose, throwing it. Blood spurted from behind her knee: It had hit an artery and removing the serpent had torn it open a bit. It coiled quickly. She brought her foot down hard enough to break its spine in the middle. Nonetheless it was able to whip its upper body around and sank its fangs into her leg a second time. Once more Aejs ripped it loose, wishing desperately she had the full use of her hands to grasp a weapon with, and stomped it again, this time catching it behind the head and killing it instantly.

Aejs staggered as the room seemed to twist around her. Her legs gave and she dropped to her knees, curled up, and pressed her splinted hands around the ugliest of the burning wounds, fully aware that she had gotten the full load of venom. Most of it into the artery behind her knee which continued to bleed heavily. "Shit! Shit! Hell Shitting Damnation! Shit!"

Josh knelt beside her, his eyes like saucers. "It bit you. How did it get in here?" He felt chilled to the bone: if she had not acted, he would be dead. As things stood, she might soon be.

"Don't know. Get Taun. I'm going to be sick," she said, and then threw up all over herself and the snake. Considering how quickly the symptoms had shown up, she knew she was in trouble. She pressed the splinted palm of her hand to the artery, trying to slow the bleeding. Blood oozed around and through the splints.

Josh raced out, returning with Taun, followed closely by Skree, Becca, Raim, and Omer. A crowd formed outside the door.

Taun dropped to his knees, pressing his fingers around the wound, Reading it quickly. The flesh around the wound had already started to blacken. "This is bad. It's a nerve toxin. Even lifemages have trouble with it. One bite went straight into the artery."

"Tell me something I don't know," Aejys growled.

Taun's brow furrowed with worry, he hoped that some of the venom had bled out. "There were some lifemages in Charas working on a universal potion for this kind of thing. But I think they're dead. Without a gate we couldn't get it in time anyway."

Skree picked the viper up by the tail, examining it. "The Shared Life spell would not work here." He laid the dead snake on the small table, wondering if Reading its poison's structure would help at all.

"Was anyone different up here?" Raim asked. "Someone who doesn't usually come up? Or has never been up before?"

"Brother Arlethan left those books," Aejys said, a trifle unsteady, her vision was blurring and her stomach felt ready to let go again. Lethargy spread through her, bringing a strange, blanketing warmth – almost comforting. The nausea faded.

"Arlethan?" Omer frowned. "That's Dinger's first name."

"Shit..." she whispered, her voice growing faint, oddly emotionless in quality in contrast to her words. "We're betrayed." A still, painless clarity slid in – her consciousness seemed to float without anxiety of any kind; and if her body hurt she did not feel it. If this was death, then it was a far easier one than she had feared. Aejys sagged against Taun as the world started to go gray, darkening steadily around the edges until she could no longer see anything; although she could still hear them speaking and moving around her.

Screams came from the common room amid the sound of breaking chairs and tables. "Cedarbird just made his move. Taun, stay here," Skree said, grimly, pushing through the crowd and racing down the stairs. Raim and Omer followed.

Josh extended his hand to Taun. "Give me the key."

Taun pulled the key to Aejys' liquor cabinet from around his neck, tossing it to Josh. Josh went for the Dragonsbreath since it was the strongest and took several long pulls. The power surged within him as Josiah Abelard awakened in his mind.

"Josiah," Aejys called weakly, feeling him touch her. "Stay alive."

"I will." He turned and strode out.

\* \* \* \*

Twenty toughs armed with knives and clubs filled the room, killing the customers as well as the help. Aejys' people and the customers were fighting back, but the floor was already deep in dead, dying, and wounded. Josiah spied Zacham hiding under a

table weeping. He grabbed the boy, "Go for help," he said, and with a word of power popped the boy out of the room and into the warehouse where Aeijys' caravan guards wintered.

A man came at Josiah with a knife. He pivoted, caught the man's wrist with a twist, and broke his arm at the elbow across his knee: Josiah Abelard started out in life as a battlemage and that was where Josh's uncanny ability with weapons came from. He had been accessing Josiah even then, though he had not known it. Josiah wondered as he fought if he and Josh would ever merge completely as two incarnations of the same mon should or if it would take another death and rebirth to achieve the successful merging of the two halves of himself. He hoped fervently for the former, because they desperately needed each other, needed to have no more shifting back and forth in either half or complete awareness. He stomped the fallen man across the back of the neck, killing him.

Nearby a serving woman screamed in shrill terror as a man slammed her into a wall and jerked her bodice open. Josiah yanked him back, summoned fire and smeared it across his eyes, blinding her assailant, then dropped him with a knee to his crotch: they could pick that one up later for questioning if no one killed him first. Worry for Aeijys slid across his mind and he pushed it back so that it would not slow him down. Josiah intended to show Cedarbird the full fury of an enraged battlemage. Josh's consciousness would not be able to contain him.

Skree, with the tremendous strength of his race, lifted a large mon into the air and brought him down across his knee, shattering his back, then dropped him. A shrill, ululating war cry rose from his throat as he spun into the assailants: like Josiah he had not survived by his magic alone. After spending months in the Cock and Boar while Taun tended to Aeijys' liegemyn, he knew who belonged and who did not. Skree's and Josiah's eyes met across the melee for just an instant, saying to each other silently "anything you can do I can do better," and then they moved on.

Josiah spied a beset caravan guard; saw one of his two assailants cut him. None of the guards had brought their weapons, they were wintering, not working, and clearly no one had expected to need them in the tavern. The guard clutched his side, kicking at the mon. The second assailant brought a club at his head, but the guard twisted and took it on his shoulder instead. The force was enough to send the mon to his knees. Josiah seized the knife wielder's wrist, breaking it with a snap. He caught the blade as it fell and shoved it in hard just under the breastbone. The tough cried out in pain and collapsed, dying. Josiah pivoted, kicking the second tough in the face twice, then the stomach, and then the face again. The man dropped the club. Josiah lunged, driving two fingers into the man's chest stopping his heart. Josiah offered the caravan guard a hand up. "You be okay?"

"Yeah. I been cut worse."

"Good mon."

The kitchen staff emerged with cleavers and knives in hand and pots on their heads as helmets, wading in with savage ferocity. Josiah shook his head, if their attackers had been soldiers instead of a local gang of toughs, the staff would not have had a chance. As it was they would have their hands full. But he admired their courage: Aeijys picked good people. It was not Becca's fault that she had been taken in by Arlethan while he and Aeijys were away.

The side door near the stables opened and the rest of the wintering guards rushed in with drawn swords deciding the bloody contest in Aeijys' favor.

\* \* \* \*

No one saw Dinger slip up the stairs, heading for Aeijys' rooms to be certain of his handiwork. He missed Josiah's entrance in the confusion and did not yet know he had failed to kill him. His eyes no longer looked even vaguely human, having gone completely dark amaranthine and without whites, iris or pupil. The diminutive sa'necari was tired of posing. Once this day's work was done he intended to inform Cedarbird of who was truly the master and who the servant. From this day on Vorgensburg would belong to Prince Mephistis through his loving servant Dingarim. Dingarim planned to send Aeijys to him as a gift, knowing how Mephistis longed to take the mortgiefan from her.

Dingarim peered around the door and saw only Taun, the wussy healer, with Aeijys. They were still huddled on the floor with Aeijys' head lying back against his shoulder, looking very, very pale. There was no sign of Josiah. He had arrived, fully expecting to see the mage lying dead upon the floor – that disappointed Dinger; he had been so certain Josiah would fetch the books. Clearly the serpent had gotten her instead. Apparently the famed Sharani resistance had failed her. Which was, after all, to be expected: taking out Sharani was the ultimate purpose behind his development of these genetically altered vipers. Eventually he would have a breeding colony of them to release in Shaurone. No matter. He would find other gifts for his master after he had finished with the little nerien. It would take a stronger death to cure Mephistis' deijanrael. Perhaps one of the seafolk.

Taun laid Aeijys gently aside and got to his feet. She had lost consciousness moments before. Had she been fully recovered before the attack she no doubt could have fought it off, but clearly Cedarbird knew better than to allow Aeijys to regain her strength before making his move. Taun glared at the small man, certain that he was a match for the withered monk until he saw Dinger's eyes. He sniffed and for the first time in his life recognized what Skree had always described to him: "Sa'necari!" he hissed.

"You recognize me," the small withered sa'necari smiled, exposing his fangs. "The others are all dead. Now it is your turn." He circled Taun.

Taun dropped into a crouch, hands stretched to either side, regretting that he had

never gotten beyond the basics with Skree. But then the sa'necari would probably attack with magic and it did not matter whether or not he could fight.

"I've never tasted nerien blood before. I'm certain it will be interesting."

He could hear the sounds of battle dying down; he did not know if Skree had fallen or not, but defiance woke in Taun's heart. "Do it, if you can, fucking death-eater."

"I will," Dingarim replied, his mind's power leaping into Taun's to capture his will.

Taun screamed, doubling over, clutching at his head. He focused his rage into a line with his psychic gifts, shoving the sa'necari out, staggering as he came free.

"Impressive. But not enough." The sa'necari caught Taun by the throat before he could straighten, throwing him to the ground. He sprang atop him, pinning him, his breath hot and putrid in Taun's face. The nerien was strong for his size – as all the seafolk were – but the sa'necari, with all the powers of the undead, was stronger. Dingarim bent his face, his fangs just pricking the skin of Taun's throat when a heavy weight slammed into his head, knocking consciousness from him.

Becca kicked the sa'necari off Taun. "Asshole! Did you really think I'd leave them alone with you downstairs?" She had been hiding behind the door waiting for the right opportunity.

"That was cutting it a little close, Becca."

"Maybe. But face-to-face he could have taken us both out. No sweat."

Taun touched his throat, coming away with a small crimson stain and wincing at the sight. The nerien touched Dinger, Read him quickly. He grimaced distastefully, wiping his fingers on the sa'necari's robes. "Tie him up. Gag him." While Becca took care of that with pieces of curtain she tore down, he crawled over to Aejys again and found her still breathing. "Help me get her to bed."

"Will she be all right?"

"I don't know. I just don't know." His voice was filled with so much anguish and desperation that it made Becca's throat tighten.

Together they got her moved.

The sound of steps on the stairs in the suddenly noticeable silence caused them both to freeze for an instant, and then Becca retrieved the heavy book and took up her post behind the door again. Taun spied an old saber on the wall for the first time, taking it down.

"Know how to use it?"

Taun shook his head.

"Then lose it. Get something you can handle like a chair."

Taun grabbed a small chair from the parlor, and joined Becca, pressing himself against the wall near her. The footsteps entered first the parlor looking about, then the bedroom. Taun, edgy now from getting bitten, however slightly, sprang out and swung before he looked, connecting solidly with Skree and decking the huge triton. The chair splintered.

Skree hit the floor hard and rolled to face his opponent. Seeing only Taun with the remains of the chair and Becca with the book, he smiled ruefully. "Discovered how to fight, little seal?"

"I am sorry, Skree. I did not know..."

Taun dropped to his knees, touching Skree's face. Skree pulled Taun into his arms and kissed him thoroughly, then his eyes widened as he saw, over Taun's shoulder, the tied and gagged sa'necari propped in the corner under the window. He pulled back, setting Taun aside. "You did this?"

"Becca did it."

"No," Becca corrected. "We did it together."

"Well! You have finally learned how to fight. And bringing down a sa'necari? Impressive, little seal."

Taun's cheeks flushed a pretty brown.

"They need you downstairs now. There are many wounded. When you are done here, you need to go to the winter quarters. Branch and Bluewings are there. Ash is with them. The sa'necari hit them first. Their people are all dead, including Ash's four brothers."

A look of horror passed over Taun and Becca's faces.

"Go on, Taun. Now. They need you downstairs."

Taun nodded and left.

Skree took the chair nearest the bed and leaned forward, regarding Aeijys' face thoughtfully. "What a brave one you are, Aeijystrys Rowan. A long way from well and already risking yourself for my Josiah. Perhaps you should not have trusted so heavily on your people's genetic heritage in this. You must have known you were taking a grave risk." He placed his long fingers lightly over the pulse spot in her

throat, Reading her from there. After a moment he raised his eyes to Becca's with relief mirrored in their depths. "She's taken a setback, but her body is already fighting back."

"Then she will be all right?"

Skree nodded. "I believe so. But I will stay here tonight and watch her. Tomorrow I will take every able bodied man you have left and any of your women who can or wish to fight and we will drag Cedarbird out of his hole."

"You think that is wise?"

"Look to your survivors," Skree snarled in a sudden rush of anger, "and your dead downstairs. Tell me then what is wise. Ask Branch and Bluewings what is wise."

Becca shuddered.

"Aejys will not be in any shape to command for several days. You are not a warleader. I will be so in your place and hers," he nodded at Aejys, "until she can be again."

Becca could not argue with that, so she gave him a nod and left.

Skree rose, going to stand over the still unconscious Dingarim. "Aejys wants you questioned and so you shall be. But first I will bind your magics." He pulled an obsidian blade from his belt, slitting the sa'necari's garments so he could place his fingers over each shaukra as he worked. He sheathed the blade, starting with the shaukra in Dinger's forehead, then moved down as he summoned the sea-magics and cut the connections between the power and the deathmage's will. The work was nearly complete when the sa'necari's eyes opened, realizing in horror what was being done to him. He struggled in his bonds but could not get loose. Skree simply pinned him to the floor with a casually pressed knee to his chest.

"I am so glad you are awake. It is more enjoyable that way. It gladdens my heart to give you what you gave to those mage-children, especially my godson Josiah Stormbird."

Dingarim's eyes widened at the name and he started to shake.

Skree frowned with a sudden suspicion. The triton leaned closer, taking a strong sniff. There, under the nearly overpowering stench of sa'necari, was the same scent he had caught on Tori's dead body. "You killed them, didn't you? Didn't you? The landsmage and the village on the island ... the easternmost island in the Neridians?" Skree shook with rage and grief, he threw his head back, howling like something gone mad again and again and again.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### AFTERMATH

Becca had never been in a battle or a war, but as soon as she stepped into the common room she knew what the aftermath would look like. The room had been cleared of broken furniture, which included nearly all the chairs. The dead lay along the west wall on the floor. Three wounded lay on the surviving tables. A woman with familiar golden curls lay on one table with Taun working over her. He shook his head sadly and unstopped a vial of violet powder, which he then administered by rubbing it in her nostrils and gums. Becca recognized pollendine when she saw it, a painkiller so strong and potentially addictive it was only administered to the dying. Becca moved to his side and looked down into Molly's face now stained with violet. Her eyes met Taun's and he shook his head: Molly, who had cared so diligently for Aejs in those first few weeks, was dying.

When Molly saw her, she lifted one hand weakly to Becca. Becca grasped it gently in both of hers, trying not to stare at the multiple spreading splotches of blood on the mon's stomach and chest. "Lord Aejs?" Molly whispered, too weak to speak louder.

"Just fine, Molly. Just fine. Sa'necari came up after her, but I laid him out with a book."

"That's good. That's real good." Molly closed her eyes and her hand went limp in Becca's grip.

Becca folded Molly's hands over her chest, bent, and kissed her forehead. "You were a fine mon." Abruptly, she grabbed Molly and buried her face in the golden curls with a small sob. Everything that had happened seemed to close in around her and she could feel herself losing it completely. Large hands gripped her shoulders, lifting her gently away from Molly's body. Becca looked up into Raim's dark eyes and reined herself in tightly, smearing the tears with the back of her hand.

"I know how you feel, Becca," he said, "but let her go. We need to move her. Make room for another wounded."

"What can I do? I don't know what to do." A short, tight sob came into her voice as she spoke.

"Nothing. There are plenty of us who've been there and know and can. Just sit on the stairs over there." Raim's voice was patient and gentle, but firm. He and Omer had that kind of easygoing relationship with Becca that allowed them to tell her when she was in over her head. In fact she expected it of them and right then she was only too happy to listen.

Becca sat down on the third step, leaning against the railing, desperately wishing she were not there to watch and yet unable to pull her eyes away.

"Not much we can do either," piped a small voice. Fezelbaum doffed his tiny cloak of invisibility and leaned through the railing, his head almost touching her nose. He was a queer looking little mon, wizen and gaunt, all angles. The current captain of pixie bouncers had spots of blood on his tunic. When he saw her staring at them he added quickly, "Not mine. Not a bit."

"Good, the last thing I want is to lose a single one of my bouncers."

Fezelbaum beamed at that. "Can you think of something we could do? I mean we, my myn and I, are too small for the clean up, or wound tending of large folk."

An evil glint entered Becca's eyes. "Actually you can. This is Thomas Cedarbird's doing. He hired a sa'necari to lead this attack. How he found one in Vorgensburg I don't know. Taun and I took him out. He's tied up. Skree's got him now. Tomorrow Skree will take the war to Cedarbird, but tonight a little payback would be very nice. Say, some spying and dirty tricks?"

"Oh, we're great at that stuff. We'll soften him up good. Anything else?"

Becca thought for a moment. They might need more proof against Thomas Cedarbird. This should not be simply a military reprisal and coup. There was still going to be politics involved somewhere especially with the guild masters and syndics. Cedarbird had a wussy little amanuensis named Darlbret who probably knew everything or nearly everything that was going on. It would not take much to either break him or bring him over once he knew that Cedarbird was going down. If he did not know about the sa'necari, then showing him should be quite effective. "I want a captive and I want him before morning. If I'm sleeping by then wake me when you have him."

"Who?"

"Darlbret."

Fezelbaum snickered. "You have a devious mind, Becca. I like it."

Becca smiled thinly. "Do I get him?"

"Sure. Can do. We fight the good fight."

"Then go get him."

Fezelbaum flickered out, then back again. "Aejys. Is it true about the viper?"

"Yeah. They hit her first – as a distraction as much as to take out our leader, I

suspect."

Fezelbaum looked very serious then. "We got hit bad, didn't we?"

"What do you think?" Becca gestured at the room. "Tomorrow Skree and Josh will hit them far worse."

"Didn't know Josh could fight like that. Should've expected it seeing what he did to that duelist last summer. Expected it from a triton, though. I'll miss Molly," he added, and then flickered out again to rally his cohort of pixies.

\* \* \* \*

Becca leaned against the railing again. She would probably be better off to go up to her office and read. She had finally shaken herself loose, starting up the stairs when a long blood-curdling howl erupted from Aejys' rooms. "Ohmigods! Aejys." She ran up the stairs, scarcely noticing that Josiah and Omer, the big-red-headed driver, were right behind her.

She found Skree shaking the little sa'necari like a rag doll and howling. She flung herself onto Skree's arm, trying vainly to halt him. "Stop! Stop. You'll kill him."

"He should die!"

"We need to question him first," Josiah said, placing a hand on Skree's arm.

"He killed your parents. He killed Tori and Merann."

Josiah looked suddenly very sad. "Put him down, please, godfather. I want to question him."

Skree threw the sa'necari in the corner and stood over him, glaring.

Josiah walked over to the table in the parlor where he had left the Dragonsbreath, took two more swigs from the bottle then returned, squatting down beside Dinger. "You know who I am?"

The sa'necari kept glancing at Skree as he answered, clearly in terror of the triton. "Josiah Abelard. Ever since that idiot god and her Badree Nym ransacked those soul vaults in Waejontor, we've been expecting you – trying to stomp out your lineage so you couldn't come back. The serpent was for you. Not Aejiystrys. I knew you would be the one to fetch the books. I was supposed to take out the mages so my master could kill her through the link. Deijanrael is killing him."

Josiah's stomach clenched. If he had not hesitated, if the two halves of his incarnations had been melded, Aejys would never have had to put her life on the line to save him. "Why didn't you kill me as a child?"

"Couldn't. After that first time, when I gave you back to your 'father,' I fully intended to get hold of you again when no one would know. But that fool Branch took a lock of your hair and sealed it inside that totem pole of his. His totems wouldn't let me or any of my agents near you. He had you warded against my even entering the same building as you. My lord Mephistis sent me a token to get past them yesterday late."

Josiah's eyes widened in alarm and he fairly screamed, "Get his clothes off! Quickly!"

Becca, remembering how she had found those papers in the duelist's boots the previous summer, grabbed Dinger's boots, jerking them off. The first one held nothing. She felt around in it to be certain and dropped it, looking in the next. A pair of glowing red eyes looked up at her. She shrieked, throwing the boot across the room. A round dark object fell out as it flew.

Josiah glanced, and then whipped back on the sa'necari with a word of roaring power. Skree had not finished severing the last three shaukra connections. Josiah burned them all out, including the severed ones.

The sa'necari shrieked in agony, writhing in near convulsion on the floor.

Skree looked Josiah in the eye, stating simply, "Shaukra Death."

Josiah nodded and lunged across the floor after the token. He stared in revulsion at a skull woven of human hair and gut in a small silver circle. The sa'necari that murdered him had worn one; it would get a mage past any wards another set. They were rare and incredibly difficult to make and empower and they were unique to the upper echelons of the sa'necari. He incinerated it with a word leaving a smoking ring burned into the floor. "That is how he got past Branch's wards."

Becca shoved the balled up gag back in Dingarim's mouth, then she stood and kicked him repeatedly. "Well, I guess I will have to find someone else to teach the children. Know anyone trustworthy enough to do that, Skree?"

"Are you asking for one of my people?"

Becca nodded. "Seems like a good way to further goodwill between yours and mine."

If Skree's heart had been a little less heavy at that moment he would have smiled. "Yes, I know someone. She is quite old, but still quite hale. She loves children and reads and writes every language of your coast. I will send for her as soon as I finish with Cedarbird tomorrow." He looked around for Josiah, seeing that he had moved to the chair beside the bed and sat stroking Aejs' hair. Skree joined him there, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You love her."

"Yes," he answered and changed the subject. "When the sa'necari burned the magic out of Josh, he separated us, deprived Josh of my memories and knowledge. But now when Josh drinks I am fully awakened with both Josh's and my own memories, as it should be in reincarnation. I have both memories. They are completely integrated. Josh, however, does not have them yet. You must try to heal those magic centers, get the two of us to merge when he's sober."

"Do you know how I can do that?"

"Without a lifemage? No. The holadil got the centers to heal a bit, but they are healing wrong."

Skree nodded thoughtfully. "I will see what I can do."

"I'm going with you tomorrow."

"Is that wise? The drink..."

"Is destroying my liver. But one more round of drinking will not kill me yet. Cedarbird will not get away with hurting her."

The sound of a body being dragged, bumping into furniture broke their talk and they turned to see Becca dragging the struggling sa'necari towards the door.

"Where are you taking him?" Skree asked.

"Lock him in the cellar downstairs."

"Don't put him with the other one. The blind one. Put him in a closet."

"Okay."

Skree walked over, hefting the little man to his shoulder. "Let me help you. Lead the way."

"I wish we had some real dungeons," Becca muttered ruefully. "When Aeijys builds that new place, make sure there's some dungeons."

\* \* \* \*

Josiah sat in the chair nearest the bed, his upper body bent forward so that his forehead rested against Aeijys' cheek. He could feel the fever burning in her. Skree called it a sign that her body was resisting the venom. He had told Skree that the locals called that particular viper the 'ten-step' because humans rarely took more than ten steps before the venom killed them. That sa'necari and Cedarbird had planned very well, using one of the few vipers deadly enough to take down a Sharani and

then using that attack as a distraction to come at the rest of them. Had Josh possessed Josiah's knowledge and reflexes when sober Aejys would never have been bitten.

The bells in the Ishlani temple rang the hour. Josiah counted three rings and sighed heavily. So far Aejys had outlived everyone he had ever seen bitten and Josiah Abelard had had a very long life. "I keep failing you. I'm sorry. You held us together on the long march to Shaurone. Kept more of us alive than anyone else could have under the circumstances. We need you. I need you. You pulled nearly every one of us out of the gutters and gave us something better. Tomorrow we start giving something back. Cedarbird's going down – hard. Then Skree and I will find a way to shield you from Mephistis and you can heal so you can take him down. And your sister with him. There is going to be an end to this madness."

Josiah felt Skree's arm slide around his shoulders, gripping him tightly on the left. He had not heard the triton return. "Yes, there is," Skree said. "I swear to you and to her on my honor most precious and before My God to do everything in my power to help achieve this."

Josiah turned slightly, his head pressing Skree's side as he looked into the triton's face. "It is good to have family again after so long, godfather."

Skree's heart filled with gladness at Josiah's words and he gave his shoulder another squeeze before letting it go. "Now you need to move so I can Read her again."

Josh pushed the chair back, rose, and moved to the window seat. Skree took his place. He lifted her wrist and held it for several minutes, reading as deeply as he could, then laid it down again.

"Any change?"

"None."

\* \* \* \*

The attack had come at closing with little more than a handful of the regulars lingering for a last round and those of the household, mostly caravan guards and drivers, who liked to cage a second dinner from the kitchen leftovers. They had proven tougher than Cedarbird and Dinger had expected, especially with Skree and Josiah on hand. Nonetheless, four regulars, three servers, two of the kitchen staff and three of the general household workers, including Molly, were dead. Zacham had arrived with reinforcements around the time that Skree and Josiah brought the situation under control.

Becca sent Cook and those of the kitchen staff still hale to fetch the families of the wounded and the dead regular customers. Becca made it her place to inform the families that Cedarbird was responsible for this atrocity. Becca knew that their loud

weeping and wailing and general air of helpless bereavement would quickly turn to anger and they would have the word on the streets by morning. She encouraged their anger, seeded it. Becca covered all of her opportunities to get at Cedarbird. There would be chaos, but she intended to see that it worked to Aeijys' advantage.

Becca was still up and running on adrenaline when Fezelbaum entered her office in the wee hours of the morning to inform her that not only did they have Darlbret secured in the stable loft, but they had taken every book and paper from Cedarbird's office as evidence.

\* \* \* \*

Becca threw on her heaviest cloak, following Fezelbaum to the stable. She climbed the plank stairs into the loft at the west end. The sight of Clemmerick's table and chairs where they had held a last council about how to defend Aeijys on the long march last summer made her feel very sad and lonely. She missed the big ogre terribly, as well as Tagalong and the others. They would get home eventually, but the home they were coming back to would be much different from the one they left.

The pixies had thrown Darlbret onto Clemmerick's bed. The small mon was bound and gagged. His large frightened eyes appealed to Becca to release him, or at least make sense of his kidnapping.

Darlbret was a tiny matchstick of a mon with mousy brown hair, an angular face with a long thin pointy nose which ended in a tiny up-turned knob that jutted out over his gag made of stained, dirty socks. He wore a stripped blue nightshirt with pink bunnies embroidered on the hem and wrist. His knobby knees stuck out beneath the shirt that was pulled up by the ropes the bouncers had tied him with. He reminded Becca of an over-sized pixie.

"Promise not to scream, and I'll take the gag out," Becca told him sternly.

Darlbret nodded frantically. Becca sliced the gag away with her knife rather than simply pull it out just to make a point of her own dangerousness. He sucked in a deep, shaking breath, and regarded her in silence.

"Did you know that Cedarbird intended to attack the Cock and Boar?"

"Yes."

"How long have you known?"

Tears of fright started down Darlbret's face. "Yesterday. He's been hiring toughs from one of the local gangs for weeks now. I asked him about it. He was drinking heavily. He doesn't usually do that, you know. He started boasting he was going to 'fix her.'"

"Did you know that Arlethan Dinger worked for him?"

"Yes. He's worked for Cedarbird for a decade or more now."

"Did you know that Dinger was a *necari*?"

"He is?" Darlbret squeaked in honest startlement.

"Do you think Cedarbird knew?"

"I don't know. It's possible. He doesn't confide in me as much as he used to. He's gotten very secretive ... I don't know. I just don't know anymore." He started to sob.

"Yesterday, Branch's little village was attacked, most of his family and all of his people were murdered. Dinger did that on Cedarbird's orders."

"He did?"

"That's what Dinger tells us."

"Oh, gods! Oh, my dear sweet gods." Darlbret pulled his knees up to his chin, turning into a little ball of misery as Becca went into graphic detail, repeating the grisliest parts of Skree's descriptions. After that she launched into the assault on the tavern including the murdered customers and the viper. By the time she finished, Darlbret was gasping and blubbing out, "What to do. What to do."

"Well, to start with, you could testify about what you do know when I call together the guildmasters and the syndics."

"Of course. This is awful. This is simply awful."

Becca started to feel sorry for him, yet still refused to give an inch. "I'll need to leave you under guard here. I can't take a chance on you getting loose until it's all over."

"Until what's over?"

"Cedarbird dies tomorrow."

That sent Darlbret into fresh weeping.

Becca pulled a thick layer of blankets over Darlbret, tucking him in. "I don't want you cold. I don't mean you any harm, understand? I just can't take chances. If you need something, ask the pixies. They'll do anything you want except untie you or bring someone to see you." Then she left.

Fezelbaum followed her out. "What now?"

"Now we wait. I want as many of your men as possible to remain with me tomorrow."

"It's already today. You mean we can't go fight?"

"I need you to stay and defend the Cock and Boar in case anyone gets past Skree and Josiah," she had started calling Josh by his proper name, as Skree and Taun did, "and comes after us before they get back."

"Okay."

"And if anyone does attack the inn or tries to break in, I want you to kill them. Do you understand? Kill them."

\* \* \* \*

All who wanted a piece of Cedarbird gathered in the little quad formed by the tavern, stable, and winter quarters. Skree had made it clear that participation in the assault would be dangerous and was strictly voluntary. The guards and drivers bristled with blades. Several of the household staff and servants stood with them, armed with kitchen knives, brooms, whatever they could set hands to. Cook, a large, round mon, brandished a huge cast iron fry pan, smacking her hand against it impatiently. Anger radiated from them all like a palpable force: For some their anger was cold, dangerous, and determined; for others it burned hot, made them bright and eager to fight.

Skree counted over thirty in his small army as he stood at their head with Josiah. Josiah had gone through the weapons in Aejys' cabinets. He carried her long Aroanan rune-sword, which she had been given when she became a paladin at sixteen, similar to the one she had lost at Dragonshead, at his shoulder hanging from a baldric and a pair of long knives at his hips. A flask of whiskey rested in his shirt pocket.

People were already on the streets when they marched. Shouting began, drawing folks from their homes and shops; a mob formed behind them. As Becca had known, the word had gone out, spread, and set fire to the hearts of the populace. The radiant energy of anger had now become rage.

Cedarbird's house stood in the wealthiest quarter, a sprawling three-story mansion with a high walled garden. Skree's army drew together before the wrought iron gates, awaiting his orders. The mob, free citizens and not under anyone's command, beyond influence and reason in their rage, threw themselves at the walls, going over in a wave.

"Mark them," Skree said quietly to Josiah with a nod at the house.

Josiah took a long drag from his flask, arousing the power, and cast Revelation. The spell swept through the house and grounds, and then slipped his control as it had at Castle Rowan, spreading over the city. Screams erupted in the house as he set his burning brand upon the faces of the guilty, those who supported Cedarbird's crimes in either their hearts or actions whether they had participated or not, and they awakened at the brief, searing pain.

Skree turned to his myn and the mob still hanging behind them, he raised his voice, pitched it like a battle cry to be heard above the growing noise. "The guilty have been marked! Throughout this city. No one has escaped the magic. Let the innocents go unharmed, but death to the guilty."

Nearly half the mob broke away, running back through the city, hunting, going house-to-house, shop-to-shop, in search of the brand. Josiah turned and cast another spell; he did not want mindless violence to destroy the city. The spell was called Clarity and like Revelation it enveloped Vorgensburg. Josiah Abelard had not been called the mage-master without a reason and Josiah Abelard-Stormbird was now completely his incarnation. The Vorgeni mob formed into small groups, found their leadership, and moved with purpose.

Skree grasped the wrought iron gate, ripped it off its hinges, and cast it aside. He strode into the garden, up to the door, and kicked it in. Screams erupted and the fighting began. Cedarbird's guards, some of them branded, some not, engaged their forces. Josiah drew Aeijys' sword, it whirled and danced in his skilled hand. Myn died. He stalked on, ignoring unmarked servants and aides who fled before him. Josiah found the stairs in the grand hall and went up. He had scryed the house hours earlier and knew where to find Cedarbird on the third floor. He killed only those who attacked him or bore the flame-red hellbrand on their foreheads.

\* \* \* \*

Cedarbird fled from his bedroom into his office. The 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. In times past this place had been his sanctuary, his comfort as well as the seat of his power. Now he would die here among what he loved. His people did not believe in suicide for any reason. He could only wait until it found him.

He had made some grave mistakes in his greed, his anger, and his hate. He saw that

now. Cedarbird stripped down to his waist, shoved everything off his desk onto the floor, climbing on top to sit cross-legged, waiting. He looked about himself and said a quiet prayer to Raven that they would not burn it.

The door opened and Josiah entered, bloody sword in hand.

"Kill me. But do not let them burn this place, my beautiful sanctuary."

Josiah nodded, realizing that Cedarbird had been touched by his spell of Clarity though it had not been meant for him. In the rest of the city the spell would fade in a matter of days as it always did. "This place will not be burned."

"Thank you." Cedarbird spread his arms, threw his shoulders back, and lifted his eyes to heaven. "Raven, hear me! I accept the blade." Then he lowered his eyes to Josiah's. "I am ready."

Josiah caught his shoulder to hold him steady, and then shoved the sword in under his breastbone with a violent twist. Cedarbird gasped, his body tensing and jerking at the impact and cold, searing pain. He fought down a whimper as Josiah pulled the blade out, falling back, collapsing on his side, his nails digging in around the wound. Josiah wiped his sword on Cedarbird's leg and sheathed it. The mage watched him dying in great pain, silent, not giving an inch, not begging for a quicker, easier death. Whatever Cedarbird might be, he was not a coward. Josiah respected that. He laid his hand over Cedarbird's heart, stilling it with a word. He dragged the corpse off the desk to a window, which he opened. Fastening the end of a long drape around Cedarbird's body, he shoved the corpse out. It turned slowly in the early morning breeze.

"Withdraw," Josiah shouted. "Leave this place in peace. Cedarbird is dead. His holdings now belong to Aeijstrys Rowan as payment for his crimes against her."

\* \* \* \*

Josiah climbed the stairs at the Cock and Boar, heading for Aeijys' rooms, while running through his mind how he would tell her about all that had transpired, both the good and the bad. He hoped to find her awake so that he could tell her immediately. Skree walked behind him. Aeijys' forces had suffered no deaths and only a few minor wounds. The assault had been over quickly, mostly because Josiah led the way in, cutting down everything and everyone who tried to hold him back. The aftermath had delayed their return for several hours as Josiah made certain that the grounds and house would not be looted and burned as he had promised Cedarbird.

They found Taun sitting beside the bed. The first thing that Josiah noticed was how terribly sad Taun looked and his heart skipped a beat. The joy of victory drained out of him. "Is she—"

Taun shook his head. "She's gotten so weak. She's nearly gone."

Skree pushed past Josiah. Taun moved away, leaving the chair to the triton. Skree sat down, took her wrist and Read. His expression grew dark. Then he looked up at Josiah who had come to stand beside him. "I'm sorry. She seemed to be holding her own when we left. I believed – I..." He broke off.

"Everyone leave," Josiah said, his voice taking on an odd note as he struggled not to let it break. "I want to be alone with her. Please."

Skree rose and shepherded everyone out, going with them, and closing the door behind him.

"I'm all out of magical solutions," Josiah said as he took the chair. "You have to do this one on your own. You died first last time too." Josiah sat down in the chair, leaning forward so that his elbow rested on the bed and his left hand was free to stroke her face and hair. "I've pulled you back from death twice, damn it. I'm supposed to get to keep you this time. Third time's a charm – or a curse, depends, I guess. We were so young. You never would delegate. If the mission was dangerous, you took it. But you always seemed to come back. Everyone started saying you had a charmed life. Maybe that's what jinxed it."

"What is it with you stubborn, pig-headed Sharani anyway? We had a loving triad, Nariya was nearly to term with our first children, and then you had to take one more mission. You just had to go after Hoon. I will always believe that Nariya died of grief when you didn't come back. I raised the twins alone. Never remarried..."

He struggled to maintain his indignation and anger, but it was fading. He was tired and losing it badly. Aeajys Rowan could not hear him. She would not have been able to make sense of it even if she could hear him. She did not remember her past life the way he did. He kissed her lips, pressed his face into her hair. "I'll be here when Tamlestari returns. I'll protect her and your children, dearest. That I swear."

Josiah took two more swigs of whiskey, laid his head over on her shoulder, and passed out.

\* \* \* \*

"Idiot god! He called me an idiot god!" Dynanna paced back and forth in the little courtyard, muttering and exclaiming at intervals. The godling had light red hair, almost red-blond. She was boyishly slender with modest well-shaped breasts. She wore an oversized longshoremyn's shirt that tended to slip off her shoulder, revealing the top of her breasts and soft black knee pants. Her face with its delicate structure could be very waif like at times, which was often the only thing that saved her on those rare occasions that one of the elder gods managed to catch her. She hated getting caught because they always extracted payment in some way, some pleasant, some not. And then there were a couple of elder gods who simply wanted to seal her up in a cave and forget about her, luckily they had never even gotten close to her.

"Idiot god," she screamed at the top of her lungs, making her twin brother flinch.

"Will you please stop fuming? Or take it somewhere else, I'm trying to scry." Dynarien bent over a mossy rock-lined artificial pool. He held up a small bottle containing a tiny bit of sapphire liquid, just barely enough to cover the bottom of the bottle. He could see Josiah fall asleep, still weeping about Aejys. "You need to pillage Kalirion's garden again. This is the last of the Sapphire Elixir. There isn't enough to heal a rat."

The thought of the sun god's garden yanked Dynanna from her rant. She and her paladins had gotten away with everything they needed and would have gotten away clean, except that at the last minute she decided to go back alone after a lovely red flower she had seen but did not know what it did. Kalirion caught her. She never told her brother, but that was why her youngest son, LorenRain, had such beautiful white-blond hair. She always told Dynarien that she was not sure who the father was – she was in a promiscuous phase at the time – but she knew quite well who he belonged to: He was Kalirion's. Kalirion knew it too. He had sent her notes and presents for a long time afterwards, nearly two centuries, as well as taking an active interest in his child. LorenRain saw his father regularly, wheedling from him the things that Dynanna could not get. She stopped to peer over Dynarien's shoulder. "Still watching Vorgensburg?"

"Yes." He wagged the bottle at her to point out again, in an annoyingly repetitive manner, that this was the last of it. "We owe Josiah big time for screwing his life up."

"We did not screw his life up. It just happened."

"Sis. He was our first effort. We should have kept a closer eye on him when he was a child or put a paladin down there with him."

She ignored that and tried to change the direction of the conversation. "You going down there?"

"Yes. I think you ought to help too. After all the one that did this to Aejys called you an idiot god."

Dynanna looked annoyed. It was bad enough that most of the Big Nine regarded her as an idiot, hearing it from a mortal, a bloodmage like that stupid sa'necari, was even worse. Furthermore, although Dynarien had never said it, she frequently suspected him of thinking it. She definitely was not getting any respect from anyone or anything and she had no idea how to change it. "What do you want me to do?" she asked crossly.

"Find an oracle. Find out what the images meant when Aejys scryed more than a month ago. I have come up with absolutely no clues. Find out what we can do to help get things moving. And don't forget that in three days we are meeting Hadjys

and Talons in Creeya to divvy up the take from that last soul vault. I promised her you know."

Dynanna turned to reply, but her twin was already fading out. She sighed a bit, and then mustered her resolve. Dynarien would not like it if he knew where and to whom she would have to go for answers, but she would not tell him this time either.

\* \* \* \*

"Aejys!" Dynarien covertly watched Josiah, sleeping in the chair with his forehead pressed against the bed. He did not want to wake him if he could avoid it. "Aejys."

Dynarien frowned at the lack of response. He touched her neck, reading her carefully. She was too far gone to awaken by any natural means. "Damn, this is going to get me in trouble ... this is going to get me in soooo much trouble." Bad enough the Nine were always chasing his sister – if he did this they would be chasing him too; or at least one of them would.

"Oh, well," he sighed, taking the elixir bottle from his belt pouch. There was not enough left to do serious healing, but even a few drops would pull her back from the edge. The problem was forcing her back to consciousness and the means would bring Aroana screaming in hot pursuit. The idea of spending the rest of his existence hiding from an enraged elder god made his stomach queasy. He would have to hope that his grandsire could calm her down.

Dynarien opened Aejys' shirt, stared for a second at all the scars, then put his fingers between her breasts and godmarked her. It was a very serious offense to mark another deity's paladins; but the mark would allow him to call her back.

\* \* \* \*

Aejys could see them standing there: Brendorn, Ladonys and Laeoli. She knew it was them, though she could not see their faces clearly through the swirling mists. Her heart recognized her family. If she just reached out her hands she knew she could touch them. She had been so lonely without them. Now they were close – so very close.

"Aejys!" A voice echoed through the stillness. "I command you, return."

"No!" She could feel herself being forced backwards. A gap widened between her and her family. "No, please. Let me go."

The mists vanished and she lay in darkness, feeling the warm wetness of her tears rolling down her face. She smelled the intense sweetness of roses. "Let me go. Let me go."

"I can't. It would break his heart."

The voice was male, a tenor. Aejys suddenly wished she could see him. She felt something cool touch her lips. Several drops of liquid slipped into her mouth. She swallowed automatically and her vision cleared, revealing a fair-skinned face and a long wealth of red-gold hair. "Who are you?"

"Dynarien," he said, adding before he could stop himself, "and I am in sooo much trouble."

\* \* \* \*

"Josiah."

The voice was soft and weak, but somehow it penetrated the fog of exhaustion and grief. Josiah lifted his head, looking around.

"Josiah. I'm so thirsty. Can you help me? I don't think I can sit up."

Josiah looked down and met Aejys' eyes, completely clear and without fever. "Thank the gods." He hugged her, eliciting a small moan.

"Careful. Every bit of me hurts. Can I have some water?"

Josiah poured her a glass from the pitcher on the table, and then raised her head and shoulders, cradling her against his chest in the curve of his arm, holding the glass to her lips while she drank. The room smelled of roses out of season, but Josiah failed to notice, nor would he have connected it to the Rose Warrior if he had. He settled her again, "Rest. I'm going for Taun. He'll want to Read you again now that you are awake."

\* \* \* \*

Josiah knocked on Taun's door. The little nerien opened it, blinking sleepily. Then he realized through the fog that it was Josiah and snapped out of it. "Aejys?"

"She's awake. She says she hurts all over. Will you come?"

"Awake?" Taun, expecting to hear that she had died, was startled by a surge of hope.

"Yes. She needs you."

"Let me get my bag." Taun disappeared, returning quickly to follow Josiah down the hall.

"I fell asleep trying to think of a spell, any spell, that might help. But I was never much of a student of life magic anymore than I was of the arts of the sa'necari. Life

magic is one of those forms I could not master anyway – I never had the gift. I simply could not find anything that would help. Then I fell asleep."

Taun gave him an odd look as they entered Aejs' rooms. "You're sober."

It was a statement, not a question, and that puzzled Josiah. "Yes, I'm sober. Why?"

Taun moved to the chair, casting frequent glances over his shoulder at Josiah. "You're sober," Taun muttered, repeating it several times.

Aejs opened her eyes at the touch of Taun's fingers on her wrist. "Every joint and muscle hurts. I can't move anything except my head."

Taun smiled at her, and then brushed his finger curiously at a spot of something blue in the corner of her mouth. It vanished. "There is no trace of the venom in your system. I don't know how this happened, but it did. However, it will probably be a few days, maybe even a few weeks, before all the effects of the venom are gone." *Unless the damage is permanent. I've never dealt with this venom before.*

"What is wrong with my being sober?" Josiah interrupted. "You wanted me to stop drinking. Now you are giving me a hard time for being sober?"

Taun did not answer right away, because what he had was an inarticulate instinct. So when a question popped into his mind he just asked it for lack of anything else and felt he had just said something stupid afterward. "Where did you hide your spellbook? The one no one could ever find?"

"Why?" Josiah had never told anyone where he kept it – too much temptation to others, even the best of them.

Taun was starting to feel like an idiot, but Josiah's answer set him on a course he felt compelled to continue on. After all Josiah had asked 'why' and not 'what'. Taun would never be able to explain it later. "Because Skree needs to learn the spells so he can help protect Aejs better."

Josiah remembered promising Skree as much before he even knew that the triton was his godfather, so he answered freely. "There is a spirit panel in the library of my Dawnlight Tower and I..." Then it hit him. "And I'm sober."

Taun reached out frowning and touched Josiah's mouth, wiping at a spot of something blue. Like the one on Aejs' mouth, it vanished.

"What is it?"

"I don't know," Taun answered. "I thought something was there, but there wasn't. I better get Skree. I don't understand what has happened here at all."

\* \* \* \*

Becca let the vigilantes' rage spend itself for a day before sending Skree and several of the guards to drag the syndics and guildmasters to a meeting the morning after. Darlbret, accompanied by Omer and Raim, went around town, identifying all of Cedarbird's holdings and informing them they were under new ownership. They also informed the denizens of each establishment that if they wanted to testify to Cedarbird's misdeeds to come to the town hall at noon. Becca, along with Cook, commandeered the town hall for the meeting. It would take months to sort everything out; however, she was off to a roaring start.

Janine came with some of her girls; all dressed in the most conservative outfits she could dig up but still gaudily gorgeous. They shepherded a group of Cedarbird's terrified prostitutes into the hall to testify. Janine wore the necklace Omer had given her, winking at him as she passed. Ash came to give his grandfather's account of the attack on his village. The tavern's servants had dressed him in buckskins as close to that of a Kwaklahmyn noble as they could get, including the eagle feathers in his hair. Ash had protested that he had no right to the feathers since he had to earn them; Becca responded by knighting him in Aejs' name, which shut him up. The young Kwaklahmyn had just become the first knight of Vorgensburg under the change of rulers – Becca having decided to declare Aejs king. No more wussy guardsmyn, they were going to have some real knights. Since Josiah would not leave Aejs' side, Skree was designated to speak in their place.

Becca started the event by presenting them with Dinger and since he could no longer cloak his visage in illusion his sa'necari nature was proven immediately. Dinger, clutching to a vain hope that someone would pardon him and heavily spelled to truth by Skree, poured out a long litany of horror going back twenty years and all done with the approval of Cedarbird. The syndics and guildmasters were looking sick by the time he finished, so she brought Darlbret up next to give them time to recover. Ash followed, then Skree.

Janine brought the prostitutes to the box. By the time their testimony ended it was very late. Becca announced then that they would reconvene the next day and keep on until everyone who wished to testify had had their say. The process would take nearly four weeks to wind down and Cedarbird to be posthumously convicted of his numerous crimes.

\* \* \* \*

It was night in the world below, but it was always daylight in the garden of Kalirion in a wondrous eternal springtime. Trees bloomed and fruited all year round. Dynanna entered the garden in a blue dress of sheerest gossamer and spider silk. Last time she had come sneaking in wearing knee pants and her favorite over-sized shirt. Kalirion, initially mistaking her for a boy, had grabbed and wrestled her down before discovering what charms lay beneath the clothing. The result of that discovery had

been LorenRain, her favorite child. After nearly two centuries of gifts flooding in, then drying to a trickle, Dynanna knew that trying to wheedle him from a distance would no longer work. LorenRain had told her as much a few decades ago. So she dressed to please with nothing underneath so he could get directly to the point, which was how he liked it.

"So what have you come to trade me your kisses for this time?" Kalirion's voice startled the little yuwenghau. She had not expected to come face to face with him so soon. Last time it had taken him several tries to catch her, this time it was almost as if he were lying in wait and that made her nervous, wondering if she had finally become predictable. But then, she reminded herself, Kalirion was the god of prophecy as well as healing and sunlight. So maybe he saw her coming. If he scryed in her direction with any frequency it would make stealing from his garden difficult in the future.

That made her still more nervous. Nervousness made her babble. She knew it, but could not stop herself. "One of your apostate priests called me an idiot god." She settled on one of the benches, which caused her dress to rise just enough for him to glimpse a well-turned ankle.

Kalirion yawned. "That would be Dingarim. He betrayed me and became sa'necari because he was afraid of death. But that isn't what brings you here."

Dynanna shook her head. "The calico cat with two kittens—"

"That would be your brother's newest catkin. He does not know he has her yet. Her name is Juldrid, a minstrel, na'halaef to Margren."

*Shit.* "And the sword?"

"The Spiritdancer. Juldrid can lead Aejs to the sword."

"Why should she?"

"Because Margren and Mephistis intend to take her children away. Bring them into the darkness. Juldrid now hates Margren. It fascinates me how quickly a deep abiding love can turn into the most roaring hate once it starts to change."

Kalirion moved beside her on the bench. "Prophecy is not a science. There can be many turnings in the path. There is a fog rolling into my vision of the future. But I will tell you this much more. Then we must begin the kissing. You will owe me many, many kisses and maybe a few more visits. The Valley of Carliff the Mad Lich must become a protectorate of Vallimrah. Aejs must agree to take Juldrid and her sons into her home as her wards. And Aejs must forgive Carliff, putting an end to his curse."

"Why? She doesn't even know him."

"I've said all I intend to," he answered, grabbing her, taking her down on the thick, sweet grass.

Dynanna sighed: Seduction was definitely not one of his strong suits, especially the second time around. Every time she had intercourse with another god she ended up pregnant, which was why she preferred mortals. Gods were not supposed to be that fecund with each other and the fact that she was the exception was an unending source of aggravation – especially since gods were much more fun in bed than mortals as a general rule. Maybe that was why the males were all so eager: knowing she could give them a child.

She opened her legs to him as he pushed her dress up. Kalirion gave her a look of sheerest delight when he saw she wore nothing underneath. He opened his robes, tossing them aside on the grass. Kalirion's perfect body, strong and clean-limbed, glistening with a slight sheen of sweat, bent over her. He was generously hung. For a moment she almost wanted him. Then he reminded her of why she disliked him so much by shoving into her with no preliminaries, causing her to cry out in pain. He was big and hard and rough. Dynanna sucked in a deep breath, willing herself to relax. It was going to be a very, very long night just like last time. He would take her several times before he let her go – which would be when the sun rose on the world below and he had to get back to business.

\* \* \* \*

Dynarien popped into the garden and found his sister by the scrying pool. He started to blurt out all that he had done that previous day and night, feeling singularly victorious, and then pulled up short when he realized what bad shape she appeared to be in.

Dynanna looked pale, worn out, somewhat battered and was clearly fuming. There was a bruise on her forehead where Kalirion had gotten too enthusiastic in his romping and accidentally bumped her into a rock. He offered to fix it, but she had been totally out of sorts with him by then and refused, wanting to just get it over with and get out. Then he'd had the audacity to propose marriage. She shoved his flowers in his face, cursed his garden with gophers, and fled.

Dynarien was alarmed; he caught her wrist and read her. "You're pregnant again. Which one were you with last night? It wasn't Hadjys, he's never rough with you."

Dynanna shrugged. "I got your answers." *"Ironic. A god of punishment is gentle and a god of healing is an asshole. Oh, well.* Then rather than get too irritated, she allowed herself to savor the time Badonth, god of war and vengeance, had lost a round to her. Badonth still insisted that if he could just get her into the bedroom she would never want to leave. He had almost managed to shove her into it before she kicked him in the face and escaped with half his armory. Badonth tended to leave that last part out when talking about the encounter. Dynanna had refused to tell

Dynarien where she had gotten all the weapons and armor, knowing she would probably never hear the end of it if he found out. Dynanna, herself, would have been far more cautious had she ever realized just how many male deities were in active pursuit of her with their tongues hanging out, laying traps for her, and bragging at length about every sighting of her as if she were the only game worth chasing.

"I didn't want them this bad, Sis. He hurt you."

"Back off," Dynanna responded crossly, rocking her shoulders back and forth. "A good time was had by all. Don't question my methods. Do it again," she waved a fist at him, "and I'll plant this on your frigging nose."

"All right! All right." Dynarien held his hands up palms out in a gesture of surrender. He meant to say more, but stopped when he saw golden flowers springing up all over their garden. It started with just a few, here and there; then the pace of growth accelerated until it literally swept over the garden like a torrent of water. "Dynanna – who were you with last night?" He demanded in sudden panic. The Big Nine could not find their little place, but they could still send presents. "Torrundar? Kalirion? Badonth? Oh, please don't tell me it was Badonth. Please, please, please."

"It wasn't!" Dynanna snapped, rubbing her stomach ruefully. Kalirion had nailed her good on the first try, quickening her womb with the first eruption of his seed within her. She had felt it happen. She always did. And thinking about it made her even more cross than she started out that day. She liked having children, but thought it best to space them several centuries apart. "It was Kalirion."

"I wish you would not take these kinds of chances. Leave the Big Nine alone. Please stay away from them. Please."

"I am tired of discussing my sex life. Do you want to know what Kalirion said or don't you?"

Dynarien surrendered. "I do."

\* \* \* \*

Snow still covered the open ground beyond the walls of Castle Iarwind, though it had begun to melt a bit and looked slushy with streaks of muddy brown churned through the white. A large force had drawn up before the castle in the early dawn, clearing the snow away as they made camp with military precision. Tagalong climbed the spiraling stair of the highest tower in the northwest corner to have a better view. She stalked through one crudely furnished room and out onto the crenellated wall. Leaning between the merlons, Tagalong watched them curiously. At first glance she had thought them to be an army and worried about what this could possibly mean, whether in the Mar'ajan Geoa Odaren's absence, someone had decided to invade. There were several banners: the unicorn banner of the bradae, the fighting priests of Aroana; the question mark squiggle, silver on green, of Dynanna; and the third that

made her very angry, the Vehayen wolf and maple leaves – no one had a right to raise that banner with Ladonys dead. There was no Vehayen Dovanes left. She had been Tagalong's friend and Aejs' na'halaef. Laeoli, their daughter, would have had the right to raise it, but she was dead with her ma'aramlasah. Margren and Mephistis had murdered them both and then Aejs, extinguishing the small family that Tagalong had loved. Outrage built in the dwarf as she watched, but before she could start back down, determined to make them lower the banner, she saw children and males moving about the camp and she felt stunned for a moment – the army had brought their families. "What tha hell does that mean? Well, I'm gonna find out an' they'd better have some good answers."

She ran down the five flights of stairs and then out onto the second floor of the west wing, heading for the stairs that would take her through the great hall. The corridor was nearly empty at that hour so Quilla, the tall, gaunt seneschal spotted her easily.

"Tagalong. There is someone to see you, Tag," Quilla told her. Her face had an oddly thoughtful look with just the tiniest twist of concern at the corners of her mouth. "We need to talk first, privately."

"From the camp?" Tagalong turned back to her rooms with Quilla following. The outer room served as a small study and parlor with a table and chairs in the middle. Tagalong indicated the chairs with a nod, but Quilla shook her head.

"It's about Aejs."

Tagalong's eyes hooded. "Don't they know she's dead?" Her voice was rough-edged, catching slightly.

"That's just it. They're saying she's alive."

"She died in my arms!" Anger blazed up in her blunt face, sending a flush across her features. "Does Tamlestari know?"

"No. They asked for her – but if they're wrong, it would be too cruel."

"They're wrong. Margren ripped her stomach open. I – I watched her die..." Tagalong's voice hoarsened as the scene flashed through her mind and she fought back an urge to weep. "Don't tell Tamlestari. I'm going down there and throw them out. This whole thing is a travesty. They've raised Ladonys' banner and..."

Quilla's eyes dropped from Tagalong's face. "I know. I've asked Laurelyanne to meet you there. They're waiting in the great hall."

"Thanks."

Tagalong shot out past her, racing along, propelled by rage, and chased by

memories. Dozens of angry phrases formed in her mind, as she decided what to say when she got there. She would take them apart at the seams for this affront to the memories of her lost ones and utter cruelty to those left behind.

The great hall was hung with banners and tapestries. Long tables lined two walls with chairs along the inside facing out. At the head sat the great table, a large throne bracketed by two smaller ones. An intricate mosaic tile of a gigantic flowering tree, strange otherworldly roses on each branch covered the floor. Three people stood in the hall near the doors, waiting.

Her thoughts dissolved into confusion when she recognized them. Standing at the head of the little delegation was a grey-haired ha'taren in Ladonys' livery; beside her was a large, crippled woman, her right arm hanging useless at her side, scar faced, body once heavily muscled but now going to fat; a little behind and to the crippled knight's side was a girl in Dynannan priest robes who could not have been more than thirteen, though her belly had already rounded with pregnancy.

"Soren?"

The aged ha'taren nodded. "Tag, before you say anything ... just trust me and hear us out."

Tagalong's eyes and heart filled with uncertainty as she turned to the crippled knight beside Soren. "Blackbird? What tha hell is going on? I never would'a suspected ya of being tha kind ta pull a stunt like this."

"It isn't a stunt, Tag, old friend. Aejys is alive."

Tagalong's eyes filled and she stamped her booted feet angrily. She wanted it to be true – desperately – but she would not allow this travesty to continue, it hurt too much; it was too cruel. "Aejys is dead. I saw her die. Margren..." Tagalong shook her head, her expression crumpling, "She died ... hard."

"I know, Tag." Blackbird knelt awkwardly, lowering her weight carefully on her good leg, to put her hand on the dwarf's shoulder. "I know. Josiah Abelard called her back from death and took her to Vorgensburg."

"No," Tagalong said stubbornly. "That drunken sot, Josh, took her body to Vorgensburg to bury her beside Brendorn."

"Tag," Blackbird said patiently with as much gentleness and firmness as she could manage. "She was already alive. I've seen her in the scrying pool at the High Temple in Armaten. Sonden saw her also."

"I – I want ta believe ... but..." The tears started again. "Josh doesn't have that kind of power. He couldn't... Not possible. Oh, he's got some magic, but nothin' like that. I wish he did."

Laurelyanne interrupted. "Sonden believes Josh is the reincarnation of Josiah Abelard."

"Josh?" Tagalong blinked back tears.

"Tagalong, do you know how Sonden, Kaethreyn, Clemmerick and Josh got atop that altar?"

"Uh uh."

"Josh split a gate, opened half of it on that altar. I cannot even begin to do something like that and I am considered an adept."

"Are ya sayin' it's possible that Aejs could be – could be alive? That this is real?"

"That's exactly what I am saying." Laurelyanne turned to one of the guardsmyn, "Would you bring me a large bowl and water? And that largest black rucksack from my chambers."

The guardsmon nodded and left.

"Is it okay if we sit down?" Blackbird asked, seeing Quilla enter the hall. "My bad leg is aching. I need to take the weight off it."

Quilla nodded at the chairs and tables.

Blackbird gestured at the child-priest to sit. Then Soren helped Blackbird to stand again and they shifted the chairs around at the table nearest the door so that all of them could sit together.

The guardsmon returned with the largest bowl the kitchens had, a wide porcelain glazed white with red Odaren roses. As Laurelyanne began, the room filled quietly with people from the castle.

An image formed. Aejs sat at the head of the horseshoe table in her favorite meeting room at the Cock and Boar. Pillows stuffed around her to support her. She looked incredibly pale and in pain, but clearly alive. Becca, Omer, and Josh sat around her, talking. There were two seafolk that Tagalong did not recognize: a triton and a nerien.

They watched for a while, listening to the voices rising from the bowl. The triton stiffened, frowning and sniffing. "Squid-fucking sa'necari!" The triton cursed, "Scrying us again. Damn Margren and Mephistis!" He stood up suddenly, sketching the Nerindalorian rune.

Laurelyanne screamed as the bowl exploded, throwing her arms across her face

barely in time to protect her eyes.

Tagalong's mouth dropped open, and she sagged back in her chair, stunned.

"Precious Gods, she's alive," said a soft voice at Tagalong's elbow.

Tagalong looked up and saw Tamlestari, tears of joy and gratitude streaking her face. "An' she's got one helluva mage," Tagalong muttered inanely.

Someone laughed, Tagalong was never certain later just who, but it set off a rush of laughter and tears through the room. People were hugging each other, stamping and yelling in a tremendous explosion of emotion.

\* \* \* \*

The household went back to sitting with Aeijys again. At least they no longer considered Josiah incapable of sitting alone with her. They had all noticed the difference since that morning when he awoke with both halves of himself merged into one mon, sober or not. That was less than small comfort to Josiah. A week had passed, and yet she showed no sign of improvement. Between all the additional properties and the loss of life in the attacks – both among their own and Cedarbird's – the household was overworked and understaffed, though Becca was working hard at fixing the situation. Skree had been too busy to do more than a cursory interrogation of Dinger, so the sa'necari remained tied to a wine rack in the north cellar, which Becca had turned into a makeshift dungeon. Skree terrified Dinger and he would start to babble every time the triton stopped by to kick him, which he did at least once a day.

Josiah had left Aeijys' side only once since that morning she awakened, when he went to purchase the new set of blades he carried: a fine longsword hung at his shoulder and a matching pair of long knives that rode at his hips.

A quick knock on the door preceded Becca's entrance. She dragged a chair over beside Josiah.

"Our properties have more than doubled," Becca told Aeijys. "I need to hire someone to help me with the books and other things." Becca watched her as she spoke. Aeijys never tried to sit up anymore. She just lay there, staring at the ceiling. Taun said her muscles were not answering her brain, he used a different word – Taun used a lot of words that Becca did not know though she was working hard to soak them up.

"Fine," Aeijys' voice was soft with a detached indifference that troubled Becca. The fire seemed to have gone out of her.

"I want to hire Darlbret."

"Did Josiah's spell mark him?"

"No."

"Then he's innocent. Hire him if you want."

"Don't you want to discuss this?"

"I'm tired, Becca."

Becca sighed at that dismissal, rose and left. She walked down the hall and entered her office. Darlbret huddled in Clemmerick's chair, wringing his hands.

"You're hired."

"Truly?"

"Aejys said you're hired. So you are."

He caught her hand and kissed it, then clung to it, murmuring "thank you," over and over.

Becca pulled her hand free. She knew he had not been eating. With no job and no money – Cedarbird had never paid him much – he had been giving it all to his sister. One of the pixies, who Fezelbaum sent to check on Darlbret, had brought Becca this news. Coupled with the fact that Fezelbaum cared enough to look in on him, it had perked Becca's initial interest: They were good judges of character.

"Let's go down to the kitchen, get you something to eat and introduce you to everyone."

"Oh, that would be wonderful. Absolutely wonderful."

As they walked, Becca got another idea. "You read and write."

"Three languages. I – I can read and write and even speak." Darlbret beamed briefly, then dropped his eyes, clearly worried that she would think him bragging.

"Could you teach me? Just common."

"Oh, yes! Absolutely."

\* \* \* \*

Aejys regarded Josiah for a long moment after Becca left. She had feeling in her body, but none of the muscles answered to her mind. Taun said it would pass, but she had begun to doubt it. Several times each day, Taun and Josiah would move her

about, exercise her limbs and rub them, trying to get a response, but nothing happened. She felt so numb and hollowed out – so wrapped up in a fog of despair, that no matter what flint and steel she chose from her memories she could not strike a spark of anger to burn it away. "Josiah."

"Yes."

"I need your promise."

"For what?" he asked taking her hand in his.

"I'm not getting any better."

"You will."

"It's been two weeks, Josiah."

"I know."

"Listen to me. This is important. If I do not get better," she stopped his protest with a look. "If I should die... If I should stay this way, promise me, you'll kill Margren and Mephistis. You'll stop them."

"I swear it. By Aroana's sword and shield, by willow and horn and hoof. I swear to see them destroyed and all who follow them."

"Thank you." Aeajys turned her head away and slipped into slumber.

\* \* \* \*

Becca sat at her desk, handling the swatches of fine cloth that Marya Maryasdottir had brought over that morning. Textiles were one of the mainstays of Vorgeni trading. She had to tell them how much she would buy to ship south. There was so much to learn. It made her dizzy thinking about it.

There was a knock on the door and Darlbret entered with a tray. A steaming carafe, cups, two small pitchers, and an array of pastries covered it.

"What's that?"

"Oh, you'll like this," Darlbret said beaming at her. "It's called coffee. My last master could not start a day without it." He was careful not to say Cedarbird's name. He settled the tray carefully, then poured a black liquid into a cup, added cream and sugar, and then nodded at her to take it.

Becca sipped carefully. It was delicious. She drank it and felt some kind of rush hit her body. "It's good."

Darlbret poured himself a cup and moved Clemmerick's chair closer to her. "Now, what are we doing today?"

"Cloth. We've got a lot of ships just sitting in the harbor waiting to take this stuff south."

"Well, this is how it works." Darlbret began explaining the intricacies of trading in textiles as well as which shipments went where. The morning disappeared.

Omer came in as the bell tower rang noon. He grinned at the way they looked huddling together over the cloth. "Janine is here."

Becca looked up. "Bring her in."

"Okay." Omer left.

"Brothels! We've got six brothels!"

"Delegate. Delegate. Delegate," Darlbret said. "It's just a matter of good management."

Janine entered wearing black silk trousers, a lacy white shirt and a long embroidered Kwaklahmyn vest.

"Are they all wearing pants these days?" Becca hissed at Darlbret.

"Many of them," Darlbret whispered back. "You haven't been getting out much."

"Too busy."

"Well, allow me the honor of escorting you on a walk through the city. Tomorrow? Noon?"

"Okay."

Becca rose as Janine came and stood before the desk. "I am so glad you could come." Becca shot Darlbret a quick glance to see if she had done it right and he winked. "Please sit. Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, thank you." Janine settled into a chair.

Darlbret poured her a cup with cream and sugar.

"Omer tells me you have a business offer."

"Yes, we do. I find myself with six brothels and have no idea what to do with them."

"If you're wanting to sell, I'm afraid I'll have to decline. I cannot afford to give you what they are worth."

"Well, actually I was thinking more along the lines of a management deal. We would split the—" She glanced at Darlbret who mouthed the word 'net'. "Split the net profits."

"That could be workable."

"Also, there are increasing numbers of tritons, neriens and Sharani coming in with tastes that run to males. Could you accommodate that?"

"It could be done."

"Good," Becca said.

Then they settled down to some comfortable haggling.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### GHOSTS

"You are a very strange sa'necari," Troyes said, sitting on a stump, watching Isranon wiping sweat on the back of his arm as he paused in chopping wood.

The rest of the myn were out with the herds. Isranon had noticed that the box was low and offered to fill it for Aisha, Claw's wife. Troyes had followed him out just to sit there, observing him, knowing how Isranon felt about his presence.

New Year's Day, the official first day of spring had come and gone. Yet Troyes lingered still at the farm. His being there made Isranon wary, and he struggled for a pretense of ignoring him. He watched his back; never going unarmed as he had on previous visits. Isranon suspected that the reason for Troyes' lingering here was himself, and he had made no secret of wanting Isranon, although it seemed incredible that the mon would ignore an order from Mephistis to this extent.

Troyes already had Merissa. Isranon knew that Merissa was not simply feeding Troyes, but warming his bed. He hoped she was taking precautions against becoming pregnant by him. Sa'necari were only intermittently fertile, but it would only take once to ruin Merissa's life. He wondered if the others knew, like her father. Fear of revealing her secret by asking them had kept him silent.

"I said," Troyes repeated. "That you are a very strange sa'necari."

Isranon got very tired of hearing that from Troyes, the sa'necari was baiting him. He

returned the axe to the shed where Claw kept it, conscious of Troyes walking almost at his elbow. "I am what I am."

"And what is that, half-a-mon?"

"What you see and nothing more." Isranon could feel his anger building and struggled to control it. This farm was his safe haven, his home – as much of a home as any the Dark Brother could ever expect to have – and Troyes ruined it for him. Isranon preferred to handle his problems on his own, but he was sorely tested by Troyes and began to wonder whether he should speak to either Claw or Nevin about it.

Isranon fetched his load of firewood and carried it to the house.

"And what do I see?" Troyes asked, his lips curling back from his extended fangs. "Are you, as they say, Mephistis' catamite?"

"You were supposed to be gone by now."

"I will go when I am ready. You bent over for my brother."

Isranon started to respond with a sharp word to the effect that he had not known Malthus was sa'necari –*until the night of the rape* – when he heard a familiar voice hail him from the yard.

"Isranon! I've been looking for you." Nevin strode across the open ground.

Troyes, seeing the lycan lawgiver, dropped back and then walked into another direction.

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"Keep away from Troyes," Nevin cautioned Isranon as they fought with blunted blades, well padded in thick quilted armor. Each time they practiced, Nevin worked him harder, pressing him to reach for the best he could do. Isranon could sense a desperation in Nevin's intense training, as if the older male was pushing him out of fear for his survival.

Isranon parried a thrust of the lycan's blade, side-stepped nimbly and scored with a slashing side blow that caused Nevin to stagger two steps before regaining his footing. The wolf grinned to see Isranon had not lost his edge in the two years since they had last guested him in the valley.

"It is not a matter of my avoiding him, Nevin. He seeks me out." Isranon always felt safer with Nevin beside him, and so he spoke more openly, lowering the castle walls he built around his heart in his meditations.

"I've watched Troyes watching you. He hungers for you while he sips from Merissa." Nevin signaled an end to the exercise with a flick of his blade and then sheathed it, heading back to the house. "Now that it is spring, there are places you could go. You could stay with my cousin Olin and his family."

"So you know about Merissa?"

Nevin's eyes narrowed. "Only that he drinks from her. I saw the bruises. I know you did not make them. Is there something more I should know?"

"No. Just that," Isranon sighed, sliding his blade into the sheath. Nevin had given him the blades he carried and cared for so diligently as his coming of age gift when he turned fourteen. Nevin had, previous to that given him a smaller set while teaching him as a child, and when his father, Isranon Starlore, had seen them he became angry, telling Isranon that the only way he would ever be able to keep the teaching was to die. It had shaken Isranon.

His father would have been disappointed in him for accepting this set, much less learning to use them as well as he had. But his father had been dead two years when Nevin gifted him with them. Stirred by memories of his father, Isranon's hands slipped defiantly to the knives at his hips. The Dark Brothers had been pacifists and so they had all died in a massacre of their people – all except him and his older sister. But a year after Mephistis took them both in, a sa'necari had murdered his sister, Yoleema.

"Then you know the dangers."

"I know it, Nevin. 'Be as still as the deer in the forest, for if the predators notice you they will eat you.' There is little I can do about it. I fear he would simply follow me. That would put Olin and his family at risk."

Nevin slipped his arm around Isranon's shoulders. "Then perhaps I should speak to Claw."

"No. I will handle it."

"So long as you are the hunted and not the hunter, it will always be this way. It is a choice you must make."

"I know." He put his own arm around Nevin's shoulders and they jostled each other laughing to turn the mood away from dark thoughts.

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Merissa watched his careful, thoughtful work on his blades. He was the only sa'necari she had ever seen spend so much effort and time with his blades. Most of them did not bother with swords at all, carrying nothing larger than their baneblades,

which cut the soul as well as the body, and other heavily runed knives. "You never talk to me anymore, Isranon."

"Stop playing nibble games with Troyes, Merissa," Isranon told her. He sat on a stump, running an oiled cloth along his blades.

"Are you jealous?" She leaned back across the stump to brush her shoulders against his. "That's what Troyes says. He says you're jealous because you know he's been between my legs and you haven't."

Isranon scowled in consternation. He could scarcely believe she had said that it sounded so unlike her. "Your father is right. He's dangerous."

"He has not harmed anyone on the farm," Merissa protested. "He takes his full meals elsewhere and he's gentle with the nibblets."

"Don't, Merissa," Isranon put the cloth in his pack, sheathed his sword, and pushed her away. Her use of the disparaging word nibblets irritated him as much as her actions. She was even starting to sound like Troyes. "I'm fond of you. I always will be. But what you are doing is wrong and dangerous."

She made a moue. "You're being ridiculous, Isranon."

Isranon walked away from her, refusing to argue. He could feel the hunger, his fangs emerging to scratch the edges of his tongue. His stomach tightened with revulsion even as his throat itched with craving and saliva gathered in his mouth. He could feel Merissa's eyes on his back as he walked and he kept his stride measured, proud; determined that no one would ever see the secret fear, the dread gathering in his heart and soul each time the hunger came. "I am not a monster. I will never become a monster," he murmured too softly for even Merissa's keen lycan ear to catch.

He entered the main hall of the large chinked stone house. The walls were hung with tapestries of hunting scenes. Couches lined two walls. Tables and chairs were scattered about in little clusters. Three looms dominated one end near the deep hearth where Claw's wife and his two sisters sat spinning and weaving. The nibari did most of the household tasks, but this one they preferred to do themselves.

"Mistress Aisha," Isranon gave her a polite bow of his shoulders. "If you could send a nibari or two to my rooms? I would be most pleased."

"Of course, Isranon. Kissie and Isbeth?"

Isranon smiled for she always remembered his favorites. "Thank you, Mistress."

Isranon left them. He removed his shirt and tunic when he reached his rooms, craving far more than simply blood. Isranon wanted the comfort of bodies. He climbed into the middle of his bed, sitting cross-legged as he took out his flute and

began to play. His father had told him, as each father had told their sons since the time of his ancestor the Dawnhand, that so long as one could play this flute and truly enjoy it they would never become a monster.

When they saw that he had half undressed, they undressed themselves completely and swarmed over him. Isranon laughed as they playfully divested him of his pants. Kissie robbed him of his flute, putting it away carefully. She turned her throat to his mouth, rubbing the favored vein against his lips seductively, her breasts moving against his chest. Claw's nibari were very well-trained. Isranon moaned, his fangs extending fully, and then he swept into her mind as skillfully as a vampire at the instant that he broke the skin and entered her. Kissie whimpered at first, before being caught up in pleasure, settling against him. Isbeth parted his thighs to lick her way to his balls, which she sucked and tongued before taking his spear in her mouth. Isranon released Kissie as he grew hard, sealing the wound with a word so there would be no scar. He always treated them kindly. Kissie curled around him. He tangled his hands in Isbeth's hair, pressing her deeper into his black thatch and he rode her face. He fountained and Isbeth swallowed it. Isranon drew her up and rolled Isbeth onto her back, found the vein he wanted and fed again. By taking from two, instead of one, he would not take enough to exhaust them and they would wake as rested as he would. Then he spooned around her and fell asleep. To Kissie and Isbeth he was not a monster, merely a mon with strange needs. He took no more blood from them; however he did spend the morning making love to them when they woke. Sa'necari were only infrequently fertile, producing few children. Which, to Isranon's mind was all to the good, since they were vilest feeders on death that existed.

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Isranon watched Troyes and Merissa riding in from the village. Troyes was so bold it made Isranon nervous. Merissa was laughing about something. Isranon brooded. Sooner or later the Sharani would catch him. Every time he saw Merissa and Troyes together it made his throat constrict. What if Troyes intended to harm Merissa? More and more he thought of poor Rose, whom he had loved with all of his heart and soul. He felt certain that Troyes had at least known about the killing of Rose, and possibly had done it himself. If he had done Rose, what was to say he would not do the same to Merissa when he tired of her?

"He's going to lead them to us, Isranon."

Isranon marveled at how silent the lycan chieftain was as he turned to see Claw at his shoulder. "Possibly. Troyes is very strong. Almost as strong as Bodramet and his hunger is terrible."

"You feel that do you, Dark Brother?"

A tremor of tension slide down Isranon's spine at the name Claw gave him. "Don't

call me that where he can hear."

"You flaunt your name, Isranon. What is the difference?"

"I will not deny my name. That and my flute are all I have of my father."

"You are asking them to kill you."

"The Darkness hunts me and the Light does not want me."

"You're fey. Is that Dawnhand's flute?"

"Yes." *If only it were the staff and not the flute that had survived to be handed down ... then Troyes and all the others like him would be ashes.* Isranon shook himself free of those thoughts, for Waejonan or one of his followers had stolen the staff the night before his ancestor was taken and murdered. Otherwise Waejonan could never have taken Dawnhand – not while he held the staff, Warrior, and the curse of becoming sa'necari would never have been forced upon Dawnhand's descendants.

"You'll play it for me some time?"

Isranon smiled, his face brightening at last. The lycans were the only creatures he had dwelled with who truly enjoyed his flute as much as his father had. "Now, if you'd like."

"Yes, I would like that very much. Let us lift the shadows for a time."

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The mountain passes were clear enough to travel, so Troyes had begun his preparations for departure. Merissa left the note on the nightstand telling her mother that she had runaway with Troyes and not to worry. She knew they would not start looking until she and Troyes did not return from the village and by then someone would have found the note. He was taking her with him to the court of King Baaltrystan. Merissa Redhand at the court of the king! It sounded almost too good to be true. Oh, he was harsh at times, but that was to be expected from such a powerful male.

Troyes caught her hand as they turned from the path onto a hunter's trace to cut across country and save time. She did not question it because the lycan often traveled by the back ways rather than the roads. They traveled north toward the caves that were considered the northern boundary of the clan lands. "There are none lovelier chief's daughter," Troyes said smoothly, sliding into that deep, rumbling purr that could be almost lycan. "They will all be jealous."

Merissa rewarded him with a smile.

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Isranon never told anyone that ghosts talked to him. No one would believe him. Ghosts did not talk to sa'necari. He was walking alone, trying to think after Merissa rode out again that morning with Troyes. Isranon had spent many hours over the past months arguing with Claw over these outings of Merissa and Troyes'. Claw did not like her going, but refused to outright forbid it yet. Merissa was willful. Furthermore, Claw doubted the sa'necari was stupid enough to harm her and bring the clan's wrath down on himself and the rest of his kind. The waystation was too important. Isranon, on the other hand, suspected otherwise. The ghosts that came to him that morning were wolves. They oozed up out of the earth, howling in private voices for his ears only, "Merissa! Merisssssssssaaaaaa!"

He sprinted for the house and shouted in the door, "Troyes has run off with Merissa! I'm going after them."

Then he ran for the stable before he had gotten an answer. There was no one there. Isranon saddled up rapidly and rode out, the ghosts racing about him. Troyes and Merissa had gone north with a large head start. Claw and his myn were south with the herds and there was no time to go after them. There was no question in his mind that Troyes would probably kill him, but so long as Merissa got away it would be enough. That was all he could ask for. He made his peace with it, reciting the words as he was taught them and put his heels to his mount. He could not let him kill her without trying to stop him. He experienced a brief passage of validation in knowing this was what Nevin would want him to do. In fact, this was what Nevin would have done in his place.

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Merissa woke at the tug on her wrists. She had fallen asleep, spooned around Troyes where they camped. They had ridden far into the hills. They were running away together. Her father would be angry, but he would never catch them. She would have fine clothes and a high place as the mate of a sa'necari. She would become powerful in her own right.

"Troyes?" She blinked sleepily, her eyes opening wider and then she saw what he was doing and screamed. Two slender strands of spellcord – those bands woven of enchantary fibers, puce, ebony, cerulean and gold, which could seal a mage from all access to her magic – banded her wrists like deadly bracelets, preventing her shifting. She twisted, pummeling and kicking ineffectually at the large sa'necari. Troyes shrugged off her blows, striking with a word. Merissa's screams of terror turned to a shriek of pain and then to a whimpering, weeping anguish. She curled up, pressing her folded arms across her abdomen and drawing her knees in.

Troyes' fangs extended fully as he stroked her hair. "Foolish Merissa. I only wanted you because Isranon loves you. I rited his little nibari, his beloved Rose. Oh, how

she screamed!"

Merissa's eyes ran with tears of pain and terror. She tried to speak, but her throat would not form words.

"They will never find your remains because there will not be any. I will consume all of you. I cannot begin to tell you how hungry I have been for a superior death like yours. You will make a very fine death. I have grown tired of lesser humans and dared not take a Sharani."

He lifted her up, carrying her through the trees to the far side of a little copse. As they broke through she could see the tables: a large mon shaped one with spouts and basins poised to catch the blood that would flow through the grooves; and a smaller one on which he would lay his tools.

There were many versions of the rite: from a brief one that required only spoken words before his cock and the blade entered her to the full rite which could take nearly her entire soul, requiring him to carve and write arcane symbols upon her body before plunging flesh and steel inside her. He might even begin to drink her blood and eat her flesh while he rode if he was one of those who were slow to climax. Those were the kind who usually chose shifters for the rites because shifters – like sa'necari – died hard. Troyes was one of those. She always had to be patient with him.

He stripped and secured her to the bleeding-table before the spell could fade and then drank the fear in her eyes. "It was only a matter of time, Merissa, before one of us ate you. You were always so free with your favors, so inviting. Your blood is so rich and strong."

Troyes laid an array of black-hilted blades on the table beside her, considering them. He took one and sliced her leg open from hip to knee with languid slowness, regarding the welling blood reflectively. The spell loosened, allowing her to scream. Hoof beats sounded. Troyes dropped the blade he had been using and snatched up a different one. Abruptly, Troyes skidded across her, spinning into the dirt beyond with Isranon on top of him. Isranon's horse bolted off into the woods. She watched them struggle for a moment. Then Isranon hurled Troyes into the trees, pivoted and trudged back, staggering slowly. She could not understand why he should have so much trouble moving. He was sa'necari. Then he faltered and almost fell, grabbing at the table and she saw why: Troyes' death-runed blade was shoved to the quillons in his ribs. Isranon straightened, mastering his body and stood swaying. He drew his knife from the sheath at his hip and cut her wrist free, placing the hilt in her hand, folding her fingers over it. "Get loose and flee... I can't ... hold him long."

Merissa immediately set to cutting her bonds as Isranon turned to face the returning Troyes. That one was truly a monster. How could she have been so foolish as to think she had loved Troyes! Sa'necari were hard to kill, but the match had been

decided already: Isranon was dying from the runes on the blade. Sa'necari could heal vast amounts of damage with blood; and while their other victims who fell to such blades would rise undead slaves, their own kind would simply perish; hence the old proverb of "when sa'necari fight sa'necari they do it well." Merissa slid the blade under the spellcord on her wrists, slicing it away, and then instead of bending to her ankles she simply changed form and tore free.

Merissa bounded from the table to the far side to crouch in the shadows as they grappled. Her hind leg hurt, but she could deal with it because she had to. The struggle ended too quickly. Troyes forced Isranon's sword from his hand, sending it spinning into the forest. Then Troyes pulled his baneblade from Isranon's body, swiftly shoving it in again repeatedly. Isranon's body jerked and twisted, his legs slowly giving as he sank to the ground. Merissa sprang onto Troyes back snarling and biting. He caught her by the throat and slammed her into the table, stunning her. Isranon cried out, staggering to his feet, drew his last blade and stabbed Troyes in the back.

Troyes laughed at them. "I have taken a hundred times a hundred mortgiefan. I am not an easy kill." He turned on Isranon with a word of power, summoning a net of death, striking him. Isranon screamed in anguish and fell to lie unmoving at Troyes' feet. Troyes shoved Isranon onto his belly, tore his pants open, and mounted him.

"I killed your little Rose," Troyes growled. "I rode her into death as I ride you." He shoved the blade in again and bent to drink the rising flow, preparing to suck up as many fragments of Isranon's soul as he could when it shattered at the moment of the younger male's death. Even with his immature powers, Isranon was still sa'necari and it would take more time for him to die than it would a human.

Merissa fled into the trees. There she slunk through the forest on her belly, watching Troyes riding Isranon, taking the rite, and feeding. Merissa tried to look away and could not, she had to see it in order to scan the clearing as she tried to find Isranon's sword which he had lost as he fought Troyes. She dared not make any more heedless rushes at Troyes. He would kill her; her wolf form was no match for him. But with the sword – with the sword she could break his spine, swinging it in her hybrid form when her strength and power was greatest.

There. She saw it.

Merissa crept up. Troyes was totally oblivious. He must be close to completion of the act. Shame and rage filled her. Her heart was breaking as she realized it had been Isranon she loved all along. She changed, seizing the weapon, rearing up as she swung. The blow caught Troyes just above the waist and she heard bone snap. Troyes stiffened, his eyes strange, and then toppled to the side, coming loose from Isranon, his blade falling from his hand, his seed fountaining over them both. She had saved his soul, if not his life.

"Bitch!" Troyes' lips twisted as if to speak a spell and Merissa drew back, circling cautiously. She spied more strips of spell cord in his belt. Shifting the sword to one hand, she knelt and snatched them free. She banded each of his hands in them. His broken spine had paralyzed him, but blood could heal almost anything. Troyes would get no more blood.

Then she turned Isranon over, feeling for a pulse. She found it. Merissa shouldered his arm, dragging him to the table where she laid him beside it. Then she went back for Troyes. Merissa kicked him in the side of the head twice before dragging him to the table. He was much larger and, even in her hybrid form, harder to manage. She threw him across the table on his stomach – the position for a male intended for mortgiefan – and fastened him in place. The expression of terror on his face pleased her.

"You always thought you'd be the taker, not the taken!"

Merissa crouched by Isranon, opened the vein in her wrist with her claw, and put it to his mouth. She knew her blood would not be strong enough to save him, but it might be enough to waken him. Her blood filled his mouth, dribbling down the corners, getting no response. A sob formed in her throat as her chest tightened, but before she could release it Merissa saw him swallow and felt the brief sharp pain as his fangs entered her. Some of the pain left her heart. Isranon's eyes opened and he pushed weakly at her.

"Don't, Merissa... I need too much." His eyes clenched shut. He rode a wave of sheerest agony, struggling to master his body and get past it. "Troyes?"

"I've bound him to the table. Spellcorded. Would mortgiefan heal you?"

"No."

"No, it would not heal you? Or no, you won't do it?"

"No, I ... I won't do it. Death is ... better. I've known ... this was coming. Hold me."

Merissa shook her head. "Isranon! You could have his power! And live! Please, there must be a way."

Isranon's eyes slowly closed and then blinked open again. "Kill him, Merissa. With the blade he wounded me with. The same blade ... must be the same blade."

"Will that save you?"

"Possibly. Dispel the death magics. The rest is chance ... if I don't get enough strong blood in time."

Merissa nodded, and then ran to the spot where she had felled Troyes. She saw the

blade laying in the grass. She picked it up and could feel the darkness swirling in it. A soul. There was a soul in it. She carried it back.

"Wait," Isranon called. "It's best I do it... Help me up..." he struggled to breathe, to speak. Merissa's blood had helped. "I don't understand why. But every time I do it, it works. But ... but not always ... for the others."

Merissa placed the blade in his hands. At first he felt a keen tremor of revulsion. It was a finely made baneblade, not some variant deathblade. The sa'necari forged those blades by binding trapped souls upon them: they cut the soul as well as the body. Then he seemed to hear the spirit on it call out to him for release, as if it sensed what he intended. His father had called that gift the "echo of the Dawnhand" his ancient ancestor – it was something very special and rare. "Dawnhand, give me strength."

The lycan clan-princess shouldered his weight, slipping her arm around his waist as she helped him rise. She steadied him as he stood over the bound sa'necari. Troyes sensed what they were about and screamed curses and spells, but corded, his power would not answer. Isranon raised the blade and brought it down in a single skilled strike into his heart. Troyes stilled. Need and hunger swept through Isranon, crescendoing to a roar of agony.

"His throat, help me around to his throat..."

The table was angled and spelled for the draining of the body. Merissa settled Isranon against the table. He leaned his head on it, wedged between the cold stone and the cooling flesh of Troyes' neck and chin. "Another minute or two, Merissa and I would have joined my family." His voice was soft, as if he did not quite want to say it but could not quite stop himself. The need to speak the words humbled his pride. Isranon fastened on the body and began sucking the fluids from it as much to satisfy his desperate need as to stop his own humiliating venting. He drank as much as he could before weakness claimed him and he fainted. Isranon slumped forward, his head pressed between the table and Troyes' neck. Because he had never crossed the line with the first rites, he was not as strong as the other sa'necari. Isranon was more human than they were; weaker, incredibly frail compared to the others. He was only then beginning to realize just how frail.

Merissa went into the cave to search for blood in bottles and returned to find him there. She swallowed back a cry, thinking the death magics had claimed him after all, but his heart beat strongly. She retrieved their gear, wrapping him in blankets, built up a fire and made camp to watch over him. Troyes' cave was well stocked. Apparently he had been feeding regularly. There were many, many shelves of the golden preserving bottles, all labeled. She drained Troyes' body, leaving it bound on the table as a trophy. A strange stirring of power drew her eyes to Troyes' corpse. As she watched, the blade in his heart moved and then the hilt fell away as the blade disintegrated.

"Isranon! Isranon!"

"What?" Isranon opened his eyes, pushing himself painfully onto his side, levering himself onto his elbow.

"Look!"

"When I do it, this is how it happens," he said.

A white mist emerged from the hilt, swirling motes of power dancing through it. A figure formed in the mist until it became a woman, clearly Valdren. She walked toward them, pausing before Isranon. "Dawnhand," she said, and then seemed to frown slightly in perplexity, her head tilting. "No, sa'necari, yet not sa'necari. Son of Dawnhand. You freed me, so I give you a gift and a promise. I give a kindling of the echo to fullness so when you are touched by the all-talent you will have it all. I promise you the staff of the Dawnhand, once you have ridden with gods and kings of light to the shores of Ildyrsetts."

The ghost touched him. Isranon cried out at the searing ecstasy and for a moment he could not see. When his vision cleared the ghost had departed.

"What was that?"

"When they die by their own blade, it destroys the blade. The magic being turned back on them."

"I meant the ghost. But that too. I thought ghosts didn't like sa'necari."

"I'm an exception. I am a speaker to spirits, as Dawnhand was." Isranon fell back, exhausted from speaking, struggling with the pain and the darkness sucking at him. "I'm so cold, Merissa. So very cold." Then the dark whirlpool wrapped around him and dragged him into it.

"Isranon! Isranon." Merissa shook him, but he did not rouse. She laid her ear to his chest and heard his heart beating, but his breathing was strained and uneven. She wormed beneath his blankets, wrapping around him, kissing him. "I'll keep you warm," she said and began to cry.

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Dawn light suffused the clearing, teasing across Isranon's eyelashes and drawing him to wakefulness. He hurt so bad he wanted to weep. His hands clutched at the blanket covering him. A second blanket, folded, made a pillow beneath his head. Growls came from all around him and he forced himself to sit up, recognizing the sounds of many lycans. The wolves shape-shifted around him, seven deep. Apparently Claw had summoned all his warriors, including the battle-clan that

dwelled on their lands, when he discovered the three of them missing. Isranon caught the edge of the table, using it to stand and once erect, he pushed away from it out of pride. His eyes flicked from Troyes' body draping the altar to Claw.

"So, Isranon," Claw regarded him steadily, his head tilted and his eyes hard. "Mort ta giefan at last."

"Nahn. Nahn mort ta giefan."

"You killed him. You drank from him. He is lying on that table. Is it yours? You cut him up good."

"Nahn. Nahn mort ta giefan."

"There was a rite. A rite, if not *the* rite. It's all right, man." Claw came closer. "It's your nature. You're sa'necari. You took on his power."

Isranon's throat and chest tightened painfully. He could not breathe. "I am not a monster. Yes, I killed him and I drank from him – I drank from him after he was dead. Not before. And I filled his bottles."

"The bottles he intended to fill with my blood, father."

Everyone turned to see Merissa emerge from the cave.

"He said we would run away together. But it was a lie, just to get me to his table in the hills." She hung her head, her dark hair falling about her shoulders. A sob wrenched up from her stomach and forced its way through her throat, bursting at last from her lips. Aisha went to her, gathering her daughter in her arms. "If Isranon had not followed us... Isranon had to feed. He was desperately injured. It's all my fault. I filled the bottles."

"Merissa! Don't defend me!" Isranon stepped toward her and faltered, a wave of pain striking at the core of his body. Another crashing wave and he crumpled, unconscious.

Nevin reached Isranon first, gathering the youth into his arms and pressing his head against his chest. He touched Isranon's forehead and then glanced at the crude bandages around his chest and stomach, noting the fresh stain. "He's fevered and he's bleeding."

Merissa screamed Isranon's name, tearing herself free to kneel at his side. "Father, I had to fill the preserving bottles with every single drop. Every bit of strong blood. Troyes nearly killed him."

Claw gave her a resigned, disgusted look. "I'm going to beat hell out of you when we get home. I'd rather have you badly bruised and thinking than lying dead

somewhere. See to him," he nodded at Isranon and then at the body on the table. "Cut the asshole's heart out, I want to eat it. Always wanted to eat one of them." Two lycans moved to the table and began systematically butchering what remained of Troyes. Aisha and the women went to tend Isranon.

"Whatever is in the cave belongs to Isranon," Aisha decreed before anyone could start toward it, "by right of conquest, and I will personally call challenge on anyone who tries to take the smallest piece of it." Aisha had been the fiercest of the young wolves in her youth, which was what had drawn Claw to her; he liked a feisty bitch.

"Aisha!" Claw protested, disliking the way she always put him on the spot in front of his myn; and yet he had a grudging admiration for it that he would never admit to either. They would have a big argument about it in private later, but the kiss and make up afterward would be passionate and intense. He always liked the kiss and make up.

"Old mon," she replied in her most crotchety oldwife voice. "He saved our daughter's life."

He scratched his head and then ran his fingers through the thick black thatch. "Well, there is that, isn't there?" One of his lieutenants brought him the heart and he sat down chewing on it thoughtfully. Some of the others got a big fire going while they served up Troyes body and the clan ate.

\* \* \* \*

Nevin in his hybrid form lifted Isranon in his arms and started back. Isranon's head lay against his shoulder, finally listing forward until his forehead nestled against his mentor's neck. It was a long way back and several times others offered to carry Isranon, but Nevin refused to surrender his burden. Isranon was far more injured than any of them, except possibly Merissa, realized. Nevin held him tight to his chest like a child, his expression grim. Along the way they stopped from time to time to get more blood down him. Otherwise, Nevin kept his steady pace and refused to make camp. He intended to get Isranon home as quickly as possible where Baroucha the healer could look at him.

They reached the Great House around midnight and Aisha ran ahead of Nevin to Isranon's rooms, where she turned back the bedding and set the nibari to build up the fire. Another lycan went after Baroucha.

\* \* \* \*

"A sa'necari?" Baroucha, a withered crone whose skin hung loose upon her face and arms, protested as Aisha led her into Isranon's bedroom. "You're asking me to treat a sa'necari?"

"We're asking you to treat my brother," Nevin growled. "The brother of my heart

and fur."

"But he's sa'necari! Blood heals all."

"Not Isranon. He is different."

"Please, Baroucha," Aisha asked. "Do what you can. He saved our daughter's life."

Baroucha's eyes narrowed shrewdly as she glanced from one to the other, measuring. "I do this against my better judgment. The world would be a better place without them."

She took Isranon's wrist and Read him, nodding slowly. "Blood to heal. Feed him as much and as strong as you can get into him. Food also." She took a bottle and a glass jar from her satchel. "Poppy for pain. Make a tea from this," she set a jar of herbs beside the white milky liquid that was the poppy juice. "That will bring down the fever. Beyond that, I suggest you pray." Then she rose and left.

"I'll get a glass for the poppy and then start some tea." Aisha left with the jar of herbs.

Nevin remembered Isranon's questions about god and whether his people went to hell. Certainly no just god would condemn a young male like Isranon to hell. He stroked the black hair back from Isranon's pale face. "You are a good mon, Isranon. A good mon. I... I love you."

Aisha returned, followed by two nibari with a basin and an ewer of water. Nevin took the glass from her, poured a measure of the poppy juice, and lifted Isranon up. He moaned faintly in Nevin's arms and his eyes fluttered open, glazed by the fever into troubling brightness. Nevin got the juice into his mouth, and had to encourage him to swallow it, as he was only semi-conscious. Then he laid Isranon back. Aisha filled the basin with water and soaked a cloth in it. She twisted the cloth to get the excess moisture out and gave it to Nevin. The lawgiver smoothed the cloth out and placed it over Isranon's forehead to cool him.

"I'll sit with him, Aisha."

"Nevin, you need your rest also. You carried him here. I can watch him."

"No. No, I don't want to leave him."

\* \* \* \*

Nevin sat with Isranon for hours, watching him sleep. It bothered the scarred wolf that the youth healed so slowly compared to lycans and other sa'necari. Late the next day Isranon finally woke again, hurting and Nevin got more of the fire poppy into him. He looked so much younger, in his suffering, than the combat-seasoned

eighteen year old that he was. Isranon would be not be nineteen until Sawayn in mid-autumn. It had been here, in this very valley that Mephistis had stumbled upon him. Nevin wished that meeting had never taken place.

He noticed Isranon's eyes regarding him. Nevin grasped his hand, "What is it?"

"I ...I did the right thing?"

"Yes, Isranon, you did the right thing. The honorable thing."

"Honor ... honor is a harsh master."

"Do you regret it because you hurt?"

"Look at my scars... I do not regret them."

Nevin nodded, his grip tightening again on Isranon's hand. In all cultures boys as young as fourteen were expected to take up arms and fight. Nevin perceived the troubled mix of maturity and innocence, of trust and honor, and conflicting beliefs in Isranon that he had helped create. Perhaps Nevin should not have taught him, but left him to his father's teachings. No. To stand and fight was this one's only hope. "I know you don't regret them. I am proud of you. This day I am no longer your guurmondru, but your brother of heart, fur, and spirit. I have declared this before witnesses when I bore you home that night."

Isranon looked suddenly vulnerable and grateful. "Truly?"

Nevin squeezed his shoulder. "Yes, truly. You are not a boy any longer. You are a man."

"One day, Nevin ... one day I will walk in the Light." His voice faltered as he fought sleep from the drug even as he slid into it. "A ghost, Nevin ... a ghost promised I ... I would have the staff. I have always ... wondered who stole it ... where it is." Then he slid back into sleep.

"Yes, you will have it. You will." Nevin brushed his lips across Isranon's forehead. "I love you, Isranon."

They battled the fever for three days with herbs, which reduced it, but it came back full force each time the herbs began to wear off. Throughout it all, Nevin listened, with growing horror and anger, to Isranon's fevered ramblings, conversations with people who were present only in his nightmares and memories. He learned many details of the terror under which Isranon had lived for four years while with Mephistis. What Nevin did not learn, he guessed at, based on his accumulated knowledge of sa'necari ways. The fact that Isranon had not broken under it seemed nothing short of miraculous, but Isranon's gentle ways and his refusal to fight under most circumstances belied the rod of iron in the young male's spine, the stubborn

strength that Nevin found admirable.

On the fourth day, the fever finally sweated itself out of Isranon.

\* \* \* \*

Pain remained an issue. Isranon was healing in such tiny increments that the household worried over him. By the end of a week, Isranon had begun to be awake for short intervals and Claw decided to question him about what had happened. He came up and chased the nibari out with a curt jerk of his thumb. Isranon lay curled on his side, hurting. Claw settled astride a chair he drew up to the bed.

"My bitch says you need the strongest blood we got if you're going to heal right. So I've come to offer mine, partly as an apology for things I've said."

"You don't owe me, Claw."

Claw nodded, took out his pipe, and lit it. He did not like that detached, distant quality in the young mon's voice, speaking of such worlds of hurt and none of it physical. "You lit out after them expecting to die, didn't you?" When Isranon dished him out his usual silence, the crusty, old lycan chieftain upped his tone a notch. "Answer me, youngster! Didn't you?"

"Yes. I've never fought one as powerful as Troyes before."

"So you've killed other sa'necari?"

"Yes. I've shattered the blades. Freed the souls. But I never – I never came so close to—"

Claw could see the pain glaze deepening in his eyes, he needed to either feed him or give him the fire poppy on the table before the pain worsened into agony. Merissa and Isranon were holding something back and so far coaxing had not panned out. Isranon was a proud mon. But Claw was clan chief and his curiosity had served him well. He had to know it all in case some of it impacted on the clan. "Came so close to what?"

"Dying in the rite. I was dying in the rite when Merissa broke his back."

Shame flooded Claw. He owed him an apology and the ultimate gesture of gratitude for intervening to save Merissa. Claw rose quickly. He moved to the side of the bed, lifting Isranon. He brought the glass of fire poppy to Isranon's lips first, helping him drink. Then he cradled the sa'necari like a lover, pressing Isranon's face to his throat. Drugged, weak, and in pain, Isranon was scarcely aware when he began to feed from the lycan chieftain.

"You are clan friend, Dark Brother."

\* \* \* \*

Merissa came stealing into Isranon's room a week following her father's visit, while the household slept. Isranon had begun to get up a little bit on his own, but still tired easily. She sat and watched him sleep for a time, then rose and brushed her lips across his. Isranon's eyes opened and he looked surprised and questioning at her.

"I know about Rose," she said. "I'm sorry."

His hand closed on hers. "Don't be. Her murderer is dead now. I only wish it could give her peace. But I don't know. He shattered her soul in the rite."

Merissa pressed his hand to her face. "I love you, Isranon. I always have."

"Merissa, I'm fond of you." He felt his body reacting to her closeness. "But I don't love you. Eventually I'm going to leave and I will not take you with me."

Merissa's breath caught in her throat with a sigh. "I know."

"I'm lonely, but it would not be love."

She opened her dressing robe, revealing that she wore nothing beneath it. "Couple with me then, like the wild cousins. And comfort me."

"Merissa... I..." He started to protest and then gave in, drawing her close to him and kissing her. He still hurt as he moved, but felt certain he could manage this much as he helped her slide beneath the blankets with him.

\* \* \* \*

Nevin watched Isranon packing his belongings. Three large packs had already been carried down and lashed onto Troyes' horse. It had become Isranon's by right of conquest under the laws of lycan dueling between unmarried males in which the personal possessions of the defeated were considered forfeit. Only the two saddlebags, which Isranon carried, remained unsecured on the horses.

"My brother, I do not believe this is the right way to handle this."

"I already know what you think, Nevin. And I respect it. However, I cannot live beneath this roof any longer."

"Claw took back everything he said to you. He fed you from his own throat."

Isranon sighed. Isranon had trouble getting stiff-necked and arrogant only with Nevin. Their student and teacher days were too ingrained upon the young male's heart and psyche. "He believed then. Even if he changed his mind. For most of those

who saw Troyes' body, it will always be a question in their minds of when I will cross that line. Not if."

"Then I am coming with you."

Isranon's hand paused in buckling the straps closed. "You can't. You're the lawgiver."

"I can. There are others who can serve. My cousin Nikko is fully trained, even if he's a bit young. I can become an advocate instead. I am not letting you run away without me." Nevin grinned, his heavy mouth making his ugly face an evil mask.

"I – I–"

"Olin and I will simply sit outside your little cave and howl at the moon until you let us in."

"So be it." Isranon focused on his saddlebags for a short, intense second and then gave in the rest of the way. "I'll like having you there. I didn't really want to be completely alone again."

\* \* \* \*

Claw stopped Isranon as he walked out to the barns with his packs and saddlebags. "Where are you going, Isranon? You can't take off. There's no place for you out there. You don't know where Mephistis is. Without him, the sa'necari will eat you."

Isranon looked at him a long moment before answering him. "The cave in the hills. I'm going to live in the cave."

"Isranon, don't be a fool. We're all sorry we doubted you."

Isranon shook his head. "It can never be the same between us. The fact that you would think my honor such a weak thing. I killed Troyes, but I did not take him. I did not cross the line. I am not a monster." Isranon finished tying down his belongings and fastened the lead rope of the pack animal to the saddle of his mount. Then he swung into the saddle.

"I will send the nibari to you to see that your need for blood is satisfied. We will take care of you, Isranon. We are still friends. You are clan friend. Nevin and Olin have named themselves your spirit-brothers and they intend to live with you."  
*Stubborn pig-headed youngster got his damned feelings hurt. I'm not going to let him cut his damned nose off to spite his damned face.*

"So be it. I will be glad of their company."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### MARGREN

Bodramet waited for Margren to start past him in the nearly empty corridor. He caught her arm, whirling her about to press her hard against the wall and kiss her hungrily. "He's dead. I felt it when Troyes began the rite upon him. We had arranged a link months ago to signal."

Margren wrapped her arms tightly around him, rubbing his crotch with her thigh. "They are expecting us at dinner. I will reward you afterward. Body and blood."

"I only wish it could have been me who did it."

Margren stiffened, offended. "Everyone wanted Isranon."

"No. I wanted his soul, his terror, to feast upon... As you do upon your sister."

Margren relaxed again in his arms, purring softly against his ear. "I can understand that. To me, the most important thing was Isranon's death. He stole Mephistis' affection from me."

"No one will ever steal mine from you." Bodramet bent and pricked her neck with his fangs. Blood welled. Margren stayed very well fed here and her blood was rich.

She slapped at him. "We must not be late. Nor can we arrive together."

Bodramet stepped back, making a sweeping gesture for her to precede him and watched her go. When she was fully out of sight, he started on. He had long wondered whether one who was not of that lineage could steal the Legacy of Waejonan through mortgiefan. If luck was with him, Margren might provide him with an opportunity to test it upon Mephistis' body. Bodramet had never forgiven Mephistis for interfering with his attempt to rite Isranon himself. So he would rite Mephistis instead. Waejonan blood, especially enhanced by the Legacy, must be very rich and powerful. He would make himself the greatest sa'necari in existence, perhaps the greatest of all time.

\* \* \* \*

The castle staff set out a lavish meal on a series of trestle tables that went along the walls on two sides beyond the high table – a heavy scrollwork monstrosity at the head of the room. Food was cooked for the lycans and sa'necari, served raw and bloody for the necari, and just wine and blood in ruby glass goblets for the vampires. The chairs had only a single padded arm, so that nibari could kneel beside their masters and lay their heads across their laps. Other nibari, those who were serving or simply strolling the tables in a provocative manner could offer their wrists

instead for a quick drink. The more favored nibari, the loveliest and handsomest ones, actually actively socialized with the masters as they presented their bodies for nibbling.

Margren enjoyed those meals. She had learned to slide into their minds, giving them intense pleasure as she fed from them, careful not to take too much or do them any lasting damage. She spied Juqwanch sitting in a corner of the far wall – there was no chair strong or large enough to hold him – with a raw boar haunch on his lap. He grinned when he realized she was staring at him. Margren's heart caught at the thought of tasting him and possibly testing him in bed. Juqwanch regularly offered himself, his body and blood regenerating more quickly than the shifters.

She rose from the table, feeling a trifle giddy and approached him. "May I?"

The longer they were in Hoon's castle, the wilder Margren felt and behaved. Bodramet's news about Isranon's death had filled her with the heady liquor of joy, wine and blood had done the rest.

Juqwanch settled his food between his knees and lifted her up to his shoulders, which were broader than a long bench. "I have been wanting you."

Margren wrapped herself around his stout neck and nuzzled for a moment. His skin was rough as rawhide, and the veins were harder to find than in others.

"Go up," he told her. "Up behind my ear."

Margren found it and bit. The troll blood was beyond anything she had ever tasted and she quickly became intoxicated. Juqwanch moaned, his member tenting his pants. Her face glowed at his reaction as well as the taste of his blood. This was the one true fount of ecstasy. Her spirit soared with it and then suddenly snapped. Blackness roared in and she fainted.

Mephistis saw her slump and dashed from his chair to see what had happened. Hoon followed. "What did you do?" Mephistis demanded.

Hoon patted the prince's shoulder. "It is the troll blood. She is not used to it. Your lady will sleep it off and awaken feeling as if she never died. It is a peculiar blood and must be taken slowly in small quantities until one becomes accustomed to its strength."

"I apologize, masters," Juqwanch said. "If I had known she was uninitiated, I would not have allowed her to drink so freely." He lifted Margren from his shoulders and handed her to Mephistis.

"It is not your fault, Juqwanch," Hoon told him. "Come let us take her upstairs."

\* \* \* \*

Margren got even more attention in Hoon's castle than she had in Mephistis' citadel, in part because of the diversity and richness of the place. The citadel had simply been a gathering place for the army with which Mephistis intended to take Rowanslea from her mother. Juqwanch had propositioned her and she was still considering it, wondering what it would feel like to have something as large as that creature between her legs. For the first time in her existence she fit in, felt loved and wanted. She flirted and danced and slept with a variety of males, always males: she had completely lost her taste for women. And she flaunted her conquests in Mephistis' face. All except Bodramet. She caught Hoon smiling at her antics several times. That spurred her on to greater wildness, wanting to dazzle him. Hoon was the one she wanted, the one with the true power here.

Frequently, when there was less to distract her, she brooded as she did this evening stretched out on the floor by the scrying bowl in Hoon's study. She listened to Becca and Omer talking about Aejs in concerned tones; but if Skree were to appear Margren would cover the bowl. The triton had begun to sense her obsessive scrying. He was slowly closing her out, warding each and every room. Both she and Aejs had crossed the threshold of death and returned, but Aejs had come back as a living mon, while Margren was undead. That filled her with anger and resentment.

"Why does everyone love you? Why? Can't they see what you are? A treacherous, manipulative, misbegotten bitch?"

"Perhaps, my lady, you should stop scrying if it upsets you so." Hoon knelt beside her.

Margren looked up startled, for she had not heard him come in.

Hoon slipped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her to him. "I want you, Margren. Would you come to my bed? You have lain with many others in my castle. Would you deny me?"

Joy swept over Margren as she turned her face to his. "You are the one I want most, Lord Hoon." Margren moved the bowl to a nearby table without rising, and then stretched herself perfectly across the pentagram. "Take what you wish."

Hoon, staring down at Margren's unblemished body, found himself slipping into reverie. Margren did not notice this as he stroked her in a dreamy fashion. His thoughts had turned to Aejs. He had only seen her once, but that had been enough to impress her image on his mind. He wanted her. Margren was, by all accounts and his own observation, but a pale shadow of her paladin sister. When the Sharani and their allies pushed back the Waejontori invasion, turning it into one of their own, he had ridden out with his army of living and dead to try and cut their supply lines. Aejs split her forces. He thought it a foolish move until he realized what they were doing. She bracketed his army, blocked his retreat, and sent in her heavy cavalry to cut his units to pieces. That was when he saw her, mounted on her big wynderjyn,

her gleaming armor splashed with blood, and cutting down everything in her path. For a single moment their eyes met. Then Hoon broke away, shape shifted and fled.

Hoon shook himself free, bent his face to Margren's, twining their necks and sank his fangs into her as hers entered him. As they exchanged blood, the surface of their minds danced together in an ecstatic whirl of pleasure. He slipped his cock into her and their bodies moved in rhythm to the dance of their minds and power. When they had spent themselves, they lay together in each other's arms. And that was how Mephistis found them.

The sa'necari prince swept into the room and paused, looking down on them with his head cocked and an amused expression on his face: in life Margren had been ferociously monogamous, but since rising as necari she had gone after all the pleasures she could find in whatever form they presented themselves. He wasn't sure yet of what that meant.

"What? You did not invite me?" He feigned indignation, amusement dancing in his eyes, at the edges of his full lips.

Hoon raised his head from Margren. "By all means, join us, my prince. Perhaps at dinner I should declare an orgy. With many full-meals and nibari in attendance."

"Yes," Margren hissed. The thought excited her.

Mephistis smiled at her as he joined them on the floor. "Yes, Hoon. That would be very fine." He reached down, caressing Hoon's balls and the base of his cock, which still lingered inside Margren. His touch quickened it to hardness again. "Continue."

He watched for a while, and then moved to Margren's neck, nuzzling, sinking his fangs into her throat. She moaned, twisted her head, and sank hers into Mephistis. Hoon, pumping inside her, leaned forward and began licking Mephistis' back.

\* \* \* \*

The dancers drifted across the floor in rhythm to a haunting tune in a minor chord, masters dancing with masters and masters dancing with their nibari slaves. Margren watched as some would drift away to the couches, those with nibari partners, and begin to feed upon their partner. It made her throat itch with longing and her loins grow damp. There were no screams, no sounds of terror, but the delicious smell of fear was laced with resignation among some of the nibari. Others gave off psychic emanations of lust for the touch of the fangs in their throats. Margren shivered. She narrowed her focus and realized there were depnane in the room also, dancing with sa'necari. She looked about for one of those. They were the source of the terror smells. Ahh, but one of them would taste fine.

"My love." Mephistis interrupted her musings. He dressed in fine pants of black with glittering gold and crimson thread shot through the sides and a short,

knee-length robe over that. His eyes were thoughtful as he studied her.

"Mephiiistis," she drew his name out languidly and allowed him to draw her onto the floor and into the dancing. "I don't know this one."

"I'll teach you." He kissed her lips and she yielded her mouth to him. Then they joined the dancers.

She tolerated him, smiling. The more ill he became, the less interested she became in him. He wasn't even good in bed any longer. The fires of passion and anger that had drawn her to him, the power and dominance faded day by day. And he had taken those women, those living women, into his bed. If she discovered he had gotten a child on them, she would go back and eat it.

"Might I have a turn with the lovely Margren?" Hoon inquired and Mephistis handed her off to him.

Margren's heart beat more rapidly. Here was power. Hoon exuded it as Mephistis once had. They crossed the floor in gliding steps to the rhythm of the music and Hoon kissed her lightly.

"There is someone you should meet," he told her.

A young male, clearly a vampire, stood at the side of the dance talking with several other males. He was dark-skinned and black haired, tall and very broad through the shoulders with an earthy masculinity. He reminded her of both Hoon and Mephistis, as if he were somehow kin to them. Margren glanced at the newcomer and then at Mephistis. The resemblance was strong, but while she would not have called them brothers, they looked as if they might have been cousins, except that Mephistis was far more slender and sensual.

"My son, Timon," Hoon said.

Margren glanced a question, hearing his pride.

"Of my loins and blood."

"Ahhh." Margren smiled as Timon turned toward them.

"Father?"

"You will take the next dance with Lady Margren and become better acquainted with her. I am certain you two will get along."

Timon visibly winced, but took her hand and led her into the dance.

"I'm not good enough for you?" Margren hissed.

"It's not that. I'm a lover of males. My father knows that."

Margren tensed. There had been few of those in Shaurone, although their women coupled with each other. Males were expected to love females only, they were breeders in a world where there were not enough of them. She swallowed back her revulsion and schooled her voice. "I would like to feed, rather than dance. You will excuse me?"

"Of course."

\* \* \* \*

Bodramet saw Margren dancing with Timon, Lord Hoon's son, who commanded the vampire's armies. Hoon had handed her off to his son and Timon winced, but accepted. Bodramet wondered at that. Margren, on the other hand, was becoming less than dependable as an ally. The wilder she became, the less interest she showed in him. Margren kept gazing around Timon at Hoon. Was that who she really wanted? If so, she had not gotten him yet. Hoon spent most of his time gliding over the floor in the elegant steps with a tiny chocolate skinned nibari who barely came up to the middle of the tall Lemyari's chest. Hoon seemed to favor females who were darker skinned than he was.

A nibari came up to him with a bottle and gestured at his glass. Bodramet nodded and the male poured a generous amount of blood-wine into it. Then he leaned against a tapestry of that demon-eater who was becoming an obsession of his prince and watched some more while he sipped. He approved of the graceful music in a minor chord they danced to. Hoon had provided them with a level of sophisticated hospitality Bodramet had not seen since leaving King Baaltrystan's court to follow Mephistis on his ill-fated venture to conquer Shaurone.

Another nibari, this one female and gowned in a golden yellow that matched her long hair waltzed over to him, smiling. Like all of Hoon's pleasure nibari and most of the simple nibari servants, she had a way of looking at him from the corners of her eyes with her head tilted in invitation. "You should not be alone."

This one belonged on someone's altar. But not until they had bred her several times. She was clearly Black Cliff stock and very expensive. He schooled his desires out of his mind. Hoon had made it clear to them that the nibari were not to be killed. Bodramet finished his wine and set it on a nearby table. "I'm not. You're here."

"Will you drink? I've barely been touched this evening."

Bodramet opened his arms and took her in, sipping lightly from her neck and closing the wound with a word. Tomorrow there would be a bruise and the next day nothing.

"Shall I come to your bed, tonight, good master?" she asked as he released her.

He glanced at Margren and then the lovely nibari. Margren would be incensed if she caught a nibari in his bed, but she seemed to be sleeping with half of Hoon's nobles. "Yes."

He wanted a death, but he would abide by the rules. Hoon had only given him a single depnane since they arrived. Yet he knew the prince and Margren had two or more a week. The inequity infuriated him. Then he turned his attention to Timon as the nibari moved on. Timon could not have been older than twenty when his father turned him. Vampires of all lineages fell prey to obsession when they were newborns, or most of them did. The information was all second hand among the sa'necari. But they had seen the evidence of obsession at work. The vampires mistook appetite for love, devouring and turning all their loved ones they had known while living. Bodramet wondered if Hoon had turned his entire family. It was possible, but if so, they were not in this castle, for he had asked around. No one would say anything about Hoon or Timon. Not even the most garrulous of nibari and vampires.

Timon danced almost exclusively with lycan males and Bodramet had observed young males slipping from the vampire's bedroom in the early hours. Yet never a female. Timon seemed almost pained when a female asked him to dance and escaped quickly. He was very handsome and bore a disturbing similarity to Mephistis, although he was earthy and broader through the shoulders than the prince, less sensual. Bodramet moved across the floor and touched Timon lightly on the shoulder to gain his attention.

The vampire went rigid when he saw who had touched him and cast his eyes at Bodramet's hand to indicate he should remove it. "What do you want?"

Bodramet was taken aback by Timon's response, yet recovered smoothly. "You are very handsome, Lord Timon."

Timon's lips skimmed back from his teeth. "I've had centuries to discover that."

"Would you dance with me?"

"No."

"Why not? I'm a fine dancer."

"I don't dance with sa'necari. You've been watching me for weeks. You should have noticed that."

"I prefer males and I know you do also..."

"Sa'necari have no preferences." The ice in Timon's voice was brittle and sharp. A

dangerous light came in his eyes. "They stick their rods into anything large enough to take it." Then he walked off.

Bodramet seethed. "Bitch."

\* \* \* \*

"I have heard rumors," Margren said, and paused to see if there was any reaction from the small group in Hoon's west study. She had insisted the Bodramet be present. Timon was there also, sitting near his father's great desk. "I have heard some rumors of an incident in Claw Redhand's valley."

Mephistis came instantly alert, staring hard at her.

Hoon and the others turned toward her after noting Mephistis' reaction.

Bodramet slid one hand beneath the table that stood to one side of the desk, concealing his hand clenching into a fist.

Margren schooled her features into an expression of concern. "I wondered if one of your people could tell me if the rumors are true, Lord Hoon?"

"And what are these rumors, my lady?" Hoon asked, flicking a glance at his son who usually knew every rumor in the castle. Timon shook his head.

"That a young sa'necari, a mere youth, had been murdered there."

Mephistis stiffened, clutching the arms of his chair. "Isranon!" He rose from his seat, seized Margren by the throat, and threw her across the room, charging after her. "You killed him ... you discovered where I had hidden him and you had him murdered."

Margren caught at his wrists and then pried at his fingers, trying to get them loose from her throat. "No. How was I to know that is where you sent him?"

A look slid between Hoon and Timon both at Isranon's name and Mephistis' reaction. Then Hoon rose and separated them. "Rumors, my prince, are just rumors. You don't know for certain that this young friend of yours is slain. Timon will make discreet inquiries."

Mephistis stumbled away from Margren, the flush of rage dissipating in his face. His heart hammered and pain echoed through him. Hoon poured him four fingers of Sanguine Rose after getting the prince into a chair.

Bodramet frowned at Margren for speaking so freely.

Margren shrugged, feeling so satisfied that she wanted to wiggle all over like a

well-stroked cat. She smoothed her dress and settled back in her own chair. She had hurt Mephistis and that felt very good. She also had Bodramet squirming. It all had the taste of fresh cream with cherries floating in it – blood cherries from the death tree.

Hoon Read Mephistis and poured him a second dose. "You should go up to your rooms and rest."

"My friend?"

"We will send agents to the valley to make inquiries. Lycans. They will not be suspected," Timon said.

Hoon summoned servants to help Mephistis to his rooms. Margren and Bodramet followed them out.

When Hoon sat alone with his son, he filled two glasses with a fine vintage of sylvan blood and pushed one across the desk to Timon. "There is a game being played here. I want to know what it is. I also want to know why any sa'necari would name their son Isranon. The name bothers me."

Timon stared into his glass. "I am surprised after all these centuries that Dawnhand's name can still trouble you. Especially since you betrayed him, father."

Hoon sucked in a breath. "I loved my brother ... but I had no choice." Hoon rubbed his hands over his face as if to shove away the memories. "Any more than I had a choice about turning you when I found you dying."

Timon did not address that. "Tell me how you wish this handled. Or is it at my discretion?"

"At your discretion. I wish Anksha were here. She would get to the bottom of it all in no time."

Timon shook his head, downing his glass and pouring a second. "The demon-eater must never come to Waejontor again. It is too dangerous for her. King Baaltrystan and the nobility would try to destroy her if they knew she still exists. Leave her at home, father."

"I had no intention of sending for her, I merely wished. One day, I will introduce the prince and Bodramet to Anksha. For now, find out what you can about what really happened in that valley and what is going on with this game the three of them are playing in my castle."

Timon rose. "As you wish, father."

\* \* \* \*

Bodramet followed Margren to her rooms. She quickened her pace when she realized he was on her heels and darted through a crowd of Lemyari and nibari heading for the main sitting room together. Bodramet nodded at that. He had thought for a minute she intended to betray him to Mephistis and Hoon in the study. He would teach her such things were unwise. Margren jerked her door open and ran inside. Before she could get it closed, Bodramet had his fingers around the edge and stopped it. Margren gave a yelp and snarled wordlessly at him. He yanked the door forward and then back, slamming her in the face. Any damage he did would be repaired with blood. With blood Sa'necari healed, necari mended. But it made no outward difference. Margren staggered back from the door, a hand to her bleeding nose.

"Were you going to betray me, Margren?" Bodramet asked, stepping inside. He closed and barred the door.

Margren threw up her shields. She had much power, but they were poorly made. Mephistis had had no time to train her before they were forced to flee. Now the prince seemed to have no energy to teach her. Something was badly wrong with him. He was sick. Bodramet sketched a sign and knocked the shields down. Margren retreated, and then threw a death web at him. He brushed it aside with a dismissive gesture and advanced on her.

"Is that what you were going to do?" Bodramet demanded again. "Mephistis may be willing to put up with your petty treacheries and indiscretions, but I will not."

He struck at her legs and then her head in rapid gestures, flinging the black and crimson laced power at her contemptuously. Margren stumbled, trying to protect her legs and her head. She fell. Bodramet kicked her in the ribs and stomach. Margren balled up. He dropped to her side, squatting. "I should rip the undead soul out of you. It's an easy thing to do."

"No, please."

"It's an easy thing to do. It's a shame the undead cannot be rited. You would look pretty on my altar. Or I could destroy your looks past mending. How would you like to have the rotting form of a revenant for eternity? No one willing to mount or play with you?"

"Bodramet, please."

"Please, what?"

"Please, don't."

"You think you know how to play the game? That you have power and influence? You know nothing. If I catch the smallest hint of betrayal, I or my followers will

destroy you ... or make you wish you had been destroyed."

"Bodramet..." Margren began to sob.

"Since you have not come into my bed in weeks, I have begun taking nibari there. You must earn your place between my sheets again and prove yourself loyal."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### SPOILS OF THE SOUL VAULT

Talons slept in a nest of embroidered cushions and a mountain of down filled comforters on a low bed. Creeya, the realm of the Dark Judge, was one of the coldest kingdoms on the entire continent of Merezia, being far to the north, bordered on the east by the forbidding Katal Escarpment where the Nine Gods had walled away the surviving forces of the Hellgod, Bellocar, bringing an end to the Age of Burning; to the south by the Iradrim mountains of the dwarves and the northernmost tip of Waejontor; to west by the ice plains of the Winter Mages; north lay only ice, the north pole, and beyond it the perpetually frozen land bridge connecting Merezia with the continent of Ursarius.

The door to her bedroom creaked slightly as it opened and a piquant Sharani face peered around the edge of the door facing. "Yo, Talons, you up?" Jysy asked.

Talons debated between trying to hide, which would only embolden the youth, or growling, which would probably earn her a round of teasing and loud raspberries. Jysy and her younger sister, Arruth, were irascible. The enemy was easier for the assassin to handle than the two youths were. They were twelve and eleven years old, well into adolescence for the early maturing, yet long-lived Sharani. Arruth was already kissing and telling though they had only been in Creeya for five days. Talons suspected that Jysy was getting in her part of the merry dalliance, but was considerably more discreet about it. Their hijinks were perfectly acceptable among and by the standards of the Sharani for a number of reasons: The magical energy of the kyndi prevented Sharani women from getting pregnant until their bodies were sufficiently matured; the Sharani attitude toward adolescent sexuality was 'have a good time' especially among the under classes and the young pair were street children; and with the low birthrate of Sharani males (less than one in four being born male) Jysy and Arruth had never seen so many young males in one place in their lives, so they were pretty much like a couple of sprites in a candy shop.

However, Creeya was not Shaurone, the mores were different, more subtle and restrained. Talons, although of Sharani lineage on her ma'aram's side, was Creeyan born and bred: She knew the rules, but trying to teach them to Blackbird's daughters fast enough to keep them out of trouble was giving her fits. They had agreed easily enough to the 'no stealing' rule and abided by it, but the 'no-kissing' rule was proving

harder to convince them to follow. Talons knew very well that only the fact that they were under the declared protection of the Grand Master as well as Talons' personal protégés and the additional fact that she had made their real ages, as opposed to their perceived ages, widely known was keeping them from getting in too deep: Simply put, Talons had too many people watching out for them.

Talons' grandsire, the Grand Master Takhalme Gee, had decided to repay Blackbird for her and her clan's help against Margren and Mephistis, by enlisting two of the crippled knight's daughters and bringing them to Creeya to be educated and trained. If she could have taken Birdie, Blackbird's oldest, she would have. However Birdie had chosen a different path: the feisty little cutpurse was carrying a child by the godling, Dynarien, twin brother to Dynanna the God of Cussedness and Perversity.

Birdie and Lizard were telling people that the child, a compassie, was his from an unknown bloodmother to protect it.

The sa'necari and their numerous allies had a policy of destroying yuwenghau children whenever they could find them. Their handfasting was scheduled for the Spring Equinox. Talons had tumbled to it by accident, forcing a confession from Dynarien.

So she had chosen Blackbird's second and third daughters instead, the result of which being that they had been driving Talons nuts for five days, going on six. Eventually, she told herself, the newness would wear off and the youngsters would settle back down to the responsible level they had kept to in Shaurone. For the moment, however, she had Jysy peering around her door with mischief dancing in her eyes and Arruth was certainly close behind.

Jysy's shoulder length black hair was a dense nest of tight curls, her skin a reddish chocolate midway between her ma'arams' Sharani bronze and her Jedruan sire's deep black-brown. Arruth looked far more like her ma'arams, bronze-skinned, a slender nose and broad cheekbones, her black hair more wavy than curling, and already showing signs of having their height being a head taller than her older sister.

"Go away," Talons ordered. "Let me sleep."

They responded to the order by racing into the room and throwing themselves on top of her. Talons yelped and tried to cover up more as they worked to uncover her and find the non-existent tickle spots they were convinced existed. This was definitely not helping Talons' reputation as one of the most cold-blooded assassins in the Guild. She had a hundred kills to her credit, yet would not be twenty before late spring. However, thanks to the girl's vivid descriptions of the stone troll Talons killed last autumn, the Guildsmyn were starting to refer to her as Trollbane and that compensated for some of the embarrassment.

A loudly cleared throat from some one standing in the doorway stopped the play. Talons uncovered herself and stared over the girls' shoulders. The girls gulped and

dived under the blankets. Talons' face lost all expression and her eyes turned cold and empty. Talons the playmate vanished; replaced by Talons Trollbane the assassin.

The High Patriarch to Hadjys stood in the door, glancing at the girls in solemn disapproval.

"I'll be with you in a moment, Holy Father. Just give me a moment to dress."

He nodded. "I will await you in the west study."

\* \* \* \*

Talons dressed quickly, sliding into black leather over wool: a studded tunic and trousers shoved into knee boots with a low heel. She left her baldric with its six blades hanging from the pegs on the wall, swung her shadow cloak over her shoulders, and fastened it. She carried no obvious weapons while at home, but she never went unarmed. The soft black gloves with the fingertips missing that she always wore – even in summer – concealed a magic set of rune claws, which had given her her name among the Guildsmyn. She could summon and dismiss them at will.

Then she set off for the west study by taking the north hallway, rather than crossing the great hall, choosing discretion rather than speed. The Patriarch rarely came to the palace unless it was of extreme importance or direst emergency. Talons reached the west study in good time. She knocked once, and then swept into the room. While her expression gave away nothing, she was surprised to find just her grandsire and the Patriarch, no mission advisors. She assumed a formal stance before them with her hands clasped behind her back, waiting for permission to sit.

Her grandsire granted it with a nod to the chair behind her. "You will be gratified to know that Aejiystrys Rowan has survived," he told her as she took her seat.

That was very good news, though puzzling, for Hanadi, who was reliable, claimed to have seen her dead body. Talons inclined her head in acknowledgement.

"How are your ribs?" the Patriarch asked solicitously, referring to the two that had been broken by the stone troll she slew.

"I am fit, Holy Father. Thank you."

"We have a task for you which involves Aejiystrys Rowan. Her household was attacked recently by a band led by a sa'necari," her grandsire explained. "The attackers were defeated, the sa'necari captured. They are interrogating him now, when they are finished they will execute him."

"As they should," Talons replied.

"No," the Patriarch corrected, "as you should. His soul must be sent to Hadjys. Our god himself has requested this as a favor to one of the nine elder gods. This sa'necari was once a priest of Kalirion. He betrayed his vows and embraced the magics of death and blood."

"Do I go secretly or openly?"

"Aejystrys Rowan is a friend to our faith and the Guild. Go openly. However, should she refuse to give him to you, then you must take him by stealth."

"Gather what you need, Talons," her grandsire said. "You leave within the hour for Vorgensburg. Little Bit is already being saddled."

"Vorgensburg?" *Not Rowanslea? Strange.*

"The mage who revived her took her there," said the Patriarch.

\* \* \* \*

It was the scent of roses that alerted Talons to his presence. After scanning the room for him in vain, she turned her attention to the conspicuous lump under her blankets, which she had first assumed was either Jysy or Arruth since that was where she left them. She walked over and kicked the lump hard.

"Oww!" a male voice exclaimed.

"Come on out, Dynarien. I was not planning on going back to bed, if that is what you were hoping for."

"Well," he said, emerging with a calico cat in hand, "you told me no touching, not no snuggling."

Talons scowled. "I don't want you, Dynarien. Not now. Not ever."

"You are the first woman I have ever encountered who did not want me."

"Hmmp! What do want?"

"This cat is a present for Aejys Rowan. I hoped you would deliver it for me."

"I don't owe you any favors."

"I know. But this is a very important favor. I will owe you something in return."

"Enough for you to keep your hands off Birdie? Forever?"

"Is that why you will not have me? Birdie? I like Birdie."

"She's thirteen years old."

"She won't always be. I could wait until she comes of age in two years before I lie with her again."

"No."

"This cat is very important."

"Deliver it yourself."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because Aejs Rowan is a favorite of Aroana."

"You have my terms."

Dynarien looked unhappy as he extended the cat to Talons. "So be it. I accept your terms. Her name is Dree." He would miss Birdie; it had been so sweet to lie between her inexperienced young legs.

The instant the cat left his hands for Talons' he disappeared.

"Now, what could be so important about you, little puss," Talons murmured, stroking the pretty calico, "that that rakehell would finally agree to stop shoving his rod into Birdie?" The cat purred loudly. She sat the cat on her bed and removed her cloak. The baldric of blades came off the pegs and went over her head. Next she took down two pairs of matching stilettos. One pair went into her arm sheaths and the second into her boots. She returned her shadow cloak to her shoulders, then covered it with a heavier, wool cloak: The shadow cloak was not made for the kind of real warmth she needed for traveling by gryphonback in mid-winter, but should she need it she wanted it to hand and not packed away. Finally she retrieved the backpack, which she always kept packed and ready. Talons shifted things around in it, and then reached for the calico.

"You will have to hide in here, little one. I do not need people asking me why I am taking a cat along. Delivering you is a small price to pay to protect Birdie from that predatory godling."

Dree hissed, surprising Talons. "You understand what I say?"

"Meow."

"You think I should lessen that to say, philandering?"

"Hiss."

"Promiscuous?"

"Meow."

"All right. Now get in the bag."

\* \* \* \*

Skree and Josiah sat on a rug in the middle of the floor in Skree's room. A bottle of Dragonsbreath and a shot glass waited beside Skree. Skree filled the glass precisely to a line he has painted on it earlier that day and handed it to Josiah. "Wait."

Skree gripped Josiah's wrist. "Now." Skree watched the blackened, seemingly dead magic centers awaken, becoming spotted with golden power, leaking in many disconnected directions.

Taun took the glass from Josiah and refilled it. Skree continued to Read until the leakage steadied. "Now."

Josiah drank the next glass.

The centers brightened still more, slowly finding linkages. "Now." Skree said.

Taun passed a third glass to Josiah.

The centers completed awakened, brightening to tiny suns. Skree shook his head. "I cannot find the reason it works this way. I think tomorrow we will see how holadil affects these same centers."

Josiah looked disheartened.

"I will keep trying, Josiah," Skree said.

Josiah rose and went out; he had not wanted to leave Aeijys, even for the few minutes Skree's test required, but his godfather had insisted they not continue putting it off.

As he passed through the parlor, he nodded at Zyne to get on with her other business. Zyne shook her long green hair out from around the lacework of her gills, watching him covertly from the edges of her eyes, measuring him closely. She had been the first to answer the mage-call Skree sent out at solstice. She rose and left.

\* \* \* \*

Talons arrived at a pre-arranged meeting place along the beach in the shadow of a rocky outcropping. An aged, bent old mon greeted her. They clasped arms, and then the gaffer hugged her with the strength of a far younger mon. When he released her, Talons stepped back and said, "I'm sorry about your daughter and your two grandchildren."

"They knew the risks. At least your grandsire has seen fit to appoint a guardian for the younger ones, keep the family business going."

Talons could sense his sadness though he concealed it well. "I saw Wilstryne fall, but I could not reach her in time. She died bravely. I killed the shifter."

"She was a tough mon. I was very proud of her."

"Yes, she was. Do you want the whole story of what happened in Armaten?"

The gaffer's eyes filled with gratitude. "Yes."

"Ladonys arn Rowan and Laeoli were with her: Aejiystrys Rowan's na'halaef and their daughter, paladins both. But when I got there Wilstryne was the only one left standing. She had run out of arrows and pulled her knives..." In that wise Talons began the tale.

\* \* \* \*

Talons entered the Cock and Boar in the late afternoon. The common room had only a handful of chairs and tables, widely scattered. It did not look like the prosperous tavern she had been told it was. She spied bloodstains on the floor that looked recent. She wished she had been briefed better. The gaffer had not been able to tell her much, only that an attack had been made on the tavern. There were six myn, all in trousers and padded leather like guards or soldiers and armed with knives and swords. They sat together at one table near the stairs. A large, red-haired mon rose when he saw her.

"We're closed," he said, approaching.

Talons took his measure from behind empty, expressionless eyes. If he made any untoward moves she could take him out easily. "I have come to see Aejiystrys Rowan."

"No one sees her right now," Omer told her, taking her measure as she had taken his. To the untrained eye, judging from her face and build, she was a young girl of perhaps thirteen or fourteen, but she moved with the easy confidence of someone older, dressed in black leather with her knives showing. Sharani ages were hard to gauge at times especially for someone who had only known three in his whole life. Omer, however, recognized her from her manner as a professional, someone not to be underestimated.

"Tell her I am an associate of Hanadi Majios and have come on urgent business."

Omer considered this. Hanadi had been very important in ways he did not fully understand, spear-heading an attack on the local allies of the foreign duelist who had murdered Aeijys' ba'halaef, Brendorn, the male member of her marital triad, last summer. "I'm just the captain of the guard. I'll tell Master Becca you're here and let her decide if you see Aeijys."

"As you will." Talons sat down at one of the empty tables as Omer departed. She unshouldered her pack into the chair beside her.

One of the female guardsmyn came to the table. "We will want to have a look inside that," she said.

Talons shrugged and opened it, taking the calico into her arms.

"A cat?"

"A gift to Aeijystrys Rowan from a mutual friend."

Some of the other guardsmyn sauntered over, peering curiously at the calico.

"She's a pretty thing."

The first guardsmon went through the pack, taking everything out, then putting it all back. By then the calico was being passed around, purring happily in each new set of arms.

"You know," the first guardsmon said, "if we'd had some cats, that viper would never have gotten her lordship."

"Viper?" Talons questioned. "I had not heard about that."

The whole group fell silent then, handing the calico back.

"If you have not heard, then it is not our place to tell you," the first guardsmon said.

Talons nodded, stroking the calico. The gaffer told her that Aeijys had been taken out somehow in the first moments of the attack, but did not know how. That fact had not been made public at the posthumous trial of Thomas Cedarbird.

"Master Becca will see you," said Omer, coming down the stairs.

Talons stood with the cat nestled in one arm.

"What is this?" Omer asked.

"A gift to Aeijstrys Rowan from a mutual friend," Talons repeated what she had told the guardsmyn.

Omer saw no harm in a simple cat, so he gestured for Talons to follow him. He led her upstairs, down the hall and around a corner to a room near the back above the kitchens.

Becca sat at a large battered desk. Omer took Clemmerick's chair beside it. As big as Omer was he did not fill the chair. Talons' gauged the size of the chair's normal occupant at somewhere near that of the stone troll she had killed. Becca indicated that she should sit and Talons settled into a simple wooden chair before the desk.

"You are an associate of Hanadi Majios?"

"Yes."

"What do you want, Guildsmon? Wait," Becca raised her hand to stop Talons before she spoke. "I want your sacred oath that everything you say is truth."

Talons gave her a thin, empty smile: the mon knew clearly what she was doing and was cautious. "By the book and the blade, I swear it."

Omer stared at Talons, betraying just the thinnest slice of astonishment, which melted into relief that he had trusted his instincts and not pushed his luck with her.

Talons gave him a slight nod.

"What is your name and why are you here?" Becca asked.

"I am called Talons Trollbane. I am here because the Dark Judge wants the soul of the sa'necari you captured."

"You took out a troll?" Omer asked, surprised.

"Stone troll. Alone."

"Shiiittttt," Omer hissed appreciatively which brought just a tiny whiff of a smile from Talons.

\* \* \* \*

Aejys met with Talons in the main meeting chamber. She sat at the head of the large oblong table with Skree on one side of her and Josiah on the other. Josiah carried a longsword at his shoulder and a pair of knives at his sides. Talons found that interesting for her sources had described him as a simple drunkard sailor while this mon seemed at ease and competent – dangerously so. The triton was a completely unknown quantity. Aejys looked pale and weak, barely able to hold her head up. A

small nerien healer hovered about her, helping her with her pipe. Her hands were splinted. Talons wondered about the 'viper' story. Had Aejs been bitten by something so venomous the Sharani resistance could not fight it off?

Talons took her seat at the end of the table. Omer sat down on her left and Becca on her right.

"Why are you here?" Aejs asked, her voice sounding strained with the effort to speak.

"Haejs wants the soul of the sa'necari you captured as a favor to Kalirion."

The triton frowned, turning to Aejs. "You said he was mine."

"If you kill him," Talons pointed out, "his soul will go to the Hellgod to someday return to this world. If I take his life, his soul will go to Haejs and suffer for eternity or until it is cleansed by suffering. The Dark Judge will give him far more pain than you can."

"That is true, Skree," Josiah spoke.

"They do not believe in torture. I want him to die in pieces."

"While it is true we do not torture," Talons said. "I will make an exception in this case and you can watch, triton."

"My name is Skree," he told her. "If you will make his death slow and ugly, I will yield my rights to you in this."

"Just recite his crimes while I work," Talons smiled darkly. She would now have three sa'necari numbered among her kills; even though this was an execution, it still counted. There were now only a handful of Guildsmyn with a more deadly reputation than hers – all but one were in their forties while she was not yet twenty. It felt very good.

Skree matched her smile, and then said, "Come. We finished the interrogation some hours ago and I have been eager to watch him die." Skree rose from his chair.

"A moment." Talons lifted the calico to the table. The cat ran immediately to Aejs, rubbing and purring. "She is a gift to you from the Rose Warrior. Her name is Dree."

Aejs' eyes lit then. "Dynarien. When the viper's bite cast me back again to the edge of death, he came to me in a dream, putting a single drop of elixir on my lips. The gift is accepted."

*So. The holy rakehell has already meddled as much as he dared.* "Have you the dead viper?"

"I have it," Skree said, "I have been reading it, trying to find a way to cure the lingering effects of the venom."

"When the sa'necari is slain, his head and heart taken, you must show me the viper. My people know much of poisons and venoms – and their antidotes."

The little nerien perked up and smiled at her, his expression so sweet and hopeful that Talons returned it.

\* \* \* \*

The sa'necari and a blinded Vorgen were held in the North Cellar, which had been cleared out and turned into a makeshift dungeon. They were both tied to the remaining wine rack bolted to the wall. Josiah, Omer, and Skree accompanied her.

"Strip him. Stake him out on the floor, spread-eagle. That's how they do their own victims when the intention is mortgiefan."

Omer went for a hammer and nails while Josiah and Skree cut away Dinger's clothing.

Talons leaned close to the withered sa'necari. "Do you know what I am?" she asked.

Dinger shook his head frantically, already weeping with terror.

"I am Hadjys' executioner. This day the Dark Judge will have your soul as a favor to the god you betrayed. You participated in the genocide of the lifemages, people who were once your friends, whose work you shared. You were a lifemage."

Dinger screamed. Skree had spelled him to the truth and he tended to say far more and in greater detail than anyone really wanted to hear. "Yes. Yes. I did it. I betrayed the north coast temple. We took them as they slept. Mephistis gave me the women. I sheathed myself in their bodies and felt them die. They tasted so sweet – Gods! Gods have mercy on me. Have mercy."

Omer returned. He helped Skree pin Dinger down while Josiah drove the long nails through his wrists and ankles, bending the heads so that the sa'necari could not rip himself loose.

"My only regret," Talons said, "is that your death will not free or heal the souls you have taken and broken."

She summoned her claws and started with his genitals, then rethought it, sheathed her claws and started again with her knives. She slit his cock lengthwise, peeling back the thin layer of skin, sliced rounds off it like a cook with a sausage. When she

had it down to a stump, she slit the testicle sacks open, popped the rounds out, and shoved them into Dingarim's mouth.

Omer looked green when she got that far, covered his mouth with his hands, and fled. Josiah's eyes followed him out, but Skree never took his from Dingarim. The triton's face reflected an unholy enjoyment of the whole process.

Each time the sa'necari tried to slide into unconsciousness, Talons nodded at Skree who put his hands to Dingarim's temples and forced him back to awareness. She removed his toes, then slit the skin of his calf, peeling it away in long strips. When she tired of his screaming and pleading, she cut his tongue out. Sa'necari were hard to kill, they could take a lot of punishment and continue breathing, especially the older ones who had taken hundreds of mortgiefan. She skinned him; all except his face, then slit his stomach open and pulled his intestines out, draping them about his head. She reached into his chest through the stomach cavity and cut his heart loose. Dingarim died. Talons spoke a single word as his soul rose from his body and sent it screaming to the Dark Judge.

Talons put Dingarim's heart in Skree's hands. "Take his head. Throw it all into the sea and summon lots of fish to clean his bones." Then she turned to Josiah. "Is there a place where I can clean up? Then I want to see this viper."

"How old are you?" Josiah asked, looking her over closely as he walked her back to the Cock and Boar. While it was difficult to tell, the Sharani being long-lived, she looked like a young, barely pubescent girl, which made her stone-cold butchering of the sa'necari so disturbing.

"Nineteen." Her voice was casual, indifferent. She already had more kills than most forty-year veterans.

"Are all nineteen year old Guildsmyn as bloody minded as you?"

"No. My grandsire rules Creeya."

"He's the Grand Master?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been doing this?"

She shrugged. "I made my first kill at eleven."

"Eleven?"

"He was a pedophile, raping and murdering children. Young girls to be exact. I went undercover and let him grab me."

"How did you kill him?"

"With a kiss. Do you know what bi-kyndi are?"

Josiah nodded.

"Then you know how I killed him. I am the strongest bi-kyndi the Sharani have ever produced and I've never been trained. That means any male who touches me intimately dies whether I want him to or not."

Josiah shuddered, as he had not while watching the torture death of the sa'necari. The unleashed bi-kyndi burned out the nerves, then the brain and finally stopped the heart.

\* \* \* \*

"Yes," Talons said, turning the dead viper over in her hands, "I think I can help you here. This one had a nerve toxin, right?"

"Yes," Taun answered watching her hopefully.

"Several of the strongest nerve toxins have little difficulty getting past the Sharani resistance factor. One of these, magically enhanced," she shook the viper, "killed my ma'aram. So my grandsire put his Readers and apothecaries on the problem. They produced this." Talons pulled a tiny vial from a hidden compartment of her belt. She took Taun's hand, put the vial into it, and folded his fingers over it. "Even if the venom was magically enhanced, this will still help her. Give her all of this. You should see a difference within hours."

Taun immediately turned to race out.

"Another thing," Talons drew him back. "Study the fangs, think about the way they force the venom into the body. They're hollow." The Guild had a hollow fang technology down pat, but they used it to kill. She had always wondered what a healer might do with it. In the back of her mind she could still hear Wilstryn telling her how wondrous it had been to discover that, in a family long known for taking life, there was finally one who would be giving life: her son Sohkoran. They were both dead now, but Talons hoped she had just done some small act that would atone for her having been unable to protect them.

\* \* \* \*

They sat upon a bit of rock, the surf pounding around them: Branch in his deerskins and a necklace of wolf's teeth and carved bone beads; Skree in a simple breechclout, seemingly immune to the cold; and Josiah in black wool and leather. A small bowl sat in the center. A red and black silk pouch lay atop the bowl and beneath were seven small objects: hematite to heal, ground and stabilize; red jasper to repel and

reflect Mephistis' assaults back at him; scarlet pearl to close the door on the link and prevent scrying; tawny agate, a warrior's stone of victory in battle; piece of bone from the archenwurm Aejs killed to lend her strength and power; chalcedony to ward off psychic attack; and then a perfect blood red ruby to block all magical attacks.

They chose out stones one at a time, speaking to them, chanting and calling their innate powers to life, enhancing them with their own powers and strengths. As they finished imbuing the stones they placed them in the pouch. When all the stones were in the pouch, the pouch went round, each of them tying it closed with a bit of deer hide supporting a rune or animal: A carved bone raven for Branch; the rune of Nerindalori for Skree; and the rune of Aroana for Josiah.

When they finished Skree gave the pouch to Josiah, who Jumped himself and Branch to the beach near the spot where Skree had left his clothes. Skree sprang down from the rock, wading through the surf. He dressed quickly and they walked back together.

Josiah carried the pouch to Aejs. Zyne was sitting with her when he entered. He gave a nod at the door and Zyne – after throwing a measuring, reflective glance at his back – left. Aejs slept curled on her side with her hands shoved under the pillows. She was much better, but still very tired. He kissed her awake, slipping the amulet over her head.

"Never take this off. So long as you wear it Mephistis cannot touch you."

Aejs smiled and pulled his face down for another long kiss. "Thank you. I've been dreaming about you. Climb in and I'll show you what the dreams were about."

\* \* \* \*

Taun sat for days with the dead viper. Skree had skinned it and the hide was now stretched across a long frame to cure in salt and some other smelly chemicals that made the nerien's nostrils ache when he got too close to it. Paper, pencils, and a wealth of various sketching materials, were spread across Taun's desk. The viper resided in a jar of snow to preserve it. Taun lifted the viper from the jar, extended his awareness into the dead thing, studying the muscles and the sack and gland arrangement that delivered the venom. Then he put it back into the snow and started sketching.

If there were a way to deliver medicine directly to the blood stream it would act faster than both the by mouth and the refined powder through the mucus membranes methods many healers used. Perhaps there might even be a mundane method to mimic the effects of Josiah's spell of Shared Life.

Taun put away his sketching, hefted the jar in the crook of his arm, and went downstairs. The number of people in the common room startled him until he

remembered the Cock and Boar had reopened that morning. A guardsmon snagged his sleeve. "Let me help you with that," she said, taking the viper jar from him.

Taun did not know what to say, so he just nodded and let go.

"Where are you going with it?"

"Cook. I want to boil the flesh off. I'm doing a diagram of the skeleton."

One customer stood up, waving a mug of beer and sloshing some of the foam over the side. "Here's to the good mon who saved Aeijstrys Rowan, Prince Protector of Vorgensburg, King of Rowanhart!"

"But..." Taun protested startled.

Everyone in the room stood up, shouting and waving.

"But..."

The guardsmon leaned close, whispering, "It's all over town how you and Becca nailed Dinger. And how you cured Aeijys."

Taun sighed. The attention made him distinctly uncomfortable, especially since it had been Talons' medicine and not his that brought the cure; and he knew he had not been nearly as ferocious as they were describing him. After all it had been Becca who hit Dinger with a book. That part seemed to have gotten lost.

"I'll get this to Cook, get the thing started. You stay. You deserve this."

Omer launched into another retelling of the tale, including the part where Taun decked Skree with embarrassing embellishments.

Someone pushed a chair seat against Taun's legs, pressing his shoulder to get him to sit. Someone else ordered another round and Taun found himself holding a foaming mug of golden ale before he could refuse. Someone else started singing a congratulatory song. The rest of the room took it up.

Taun lost count of how much beer and ale he had obligingly drunk as people kept refilling his glass and shoving it at him in a friendly manner. The minstrel Becca had hired to entertain Aeijys during her convalescence climbed onto a table, announcing he had written a new song in Taun's honor. Taun winced, but endured it. All the attention brought out his shyness, making him distinctly uncomfortable. The impromptu celebration continued until late evening when Skree finally appeared and rescued him, but not before stopping to add his own embellishments to the tale.

Skree put him to bed, but Taun was out of it in an instant looking for a basin to spew in. He knelt on the floor, feeling wretched as he heaved. He thought briefly

about Josiah, wondering how he could endure this so regularly.

"You will have a mighty headache, little seal, come morning."

Taun nodded and that set him off again.

Skree settled next to him, supporting him when it looked as he would follow the vomit into the basin. "And you will be very busy come morning. You promised to examine nine or ten children as possible apprentices."

"I did?"

Skree laughed, a deep roar that started in his belly. "Yes. You did."

"Ohhhh!"

"The town wants many more fighting healers."

"But I didn't... Oh, my!"

Skree laughed again. "You not only heal, you defend your patients. Ferocious little seal."

"But I can't..."

"You can. We will manage. Whatever you can't teach, I can."

Skree fetched water and cloth, cleaned him up, and then put him back to bed. This time Taun stayed there.

\* \* \* \*

Zyne crouched upon the floor of the Great Grotto, beside a small fire. She slipped out of her clothing, bowing to the fire, throwing incense into it, and breathing in the fragrant smoke as it rose. She wrote a name upon a cedar chip and threw it into the fire. Then she began to sing softly, not enough to waken anyone. The song wafted out along the strand, drifting on a private breeze, reaching undetected for the one she sought.

"Come to me. Come to me. Come to me," she chanted.

Soft footsteps on the sand told her when he arrived. She continued to sing, her spell wrapping itself around his sleeping mind tighter as she rose to greet him. This male was strong. She might never be able to take him awake and sober. This was the one she wanted. The one whose lineage would make her people strong again. He would make them strong enough to defeat the hated tritons – whose race she passed herself off as. She undressed him, pulling him down on top of her, taking him inside her as

she wrapped her legs around him. She would sing Josiah back again to Aeijys' bed at dawn before anyone would miss him. The Abelard heritage would end among the landsfolk and be continued among her own kind alone. Once she had gotten a child from him, she would kill him according to the ancient rites of the seiry.

\* \* \* \*

Talons did not return to Creeya. One of Hadjys' servants was waiting for her on the beach. He dismissed the gryphon, summoned a gate, and took her through to the neutral ground Hadjys and Dynanna had chosen for divvying up the spoils of the Dragonshead soul vault.

Hadjys himself greeted her. The god was tall and dark, broad of shoulder and narrow at the waist and hips. He wore black leather trousers and a silken tunic split fore and aft from his waist to his knees. There were three priests beside him. One carried a censor that billowed with fragrant smoke. Another carried a decanter of thick blue oil. The third held a small pillow upon which rested a silver-hilted obsidian blade.

"Remove your tunic and kneel." Hadjys ordered her.

Talons obediently stripped down to her breast band and knelt.

"Remove that also."

Talons hands shook as she laid aside the breastband.

The priest with the censer came and waved it about her, chanting in a language she did not know. Then the second priest came and anointed her head, throat, and heart. Then the third one came forward. Hadjys took the blade from the pillow and knelt before Talons.

"Will you serve me always as my paladin, defender of our ways and faith, in this life and the next, avenging the crimes perpetrated on the innocent and helpless?"

"Yes."

Hadjys cut his right palm and, as the blood welled, he placed his hand between her breasts and a little to the left so that it was precisely over her heart. The touch of his blood sent a searing rush of pain through her. She wanted to scream, but held it in. He took back his hand and the pain ended. Talons looked down and saw the tendriled Rune of Hadjys burned into her breast. Now the sa'necari could still kill her, but they could no longer take her soul in mortgiefan. Of all the gods and yuwenghau, only Hadjys had that knack of snatching his paladins' souls so quickly from their dying bodies that the sa'necari could not catch any of it.

"Dress," Hadjys told her. "Come and sit with me. Dynanna should arrive soon with

the sack of souls."

Dynanna arrived wearing a scarlet silk dress with a neckline that plunged almost to her waist and looking a bit whey-faced. She lowered the sack, gave Hadjys a long look, and rushed into his arms as he rose to greet her.

Hadjys held her for a long time, kissing her deeply and then just holding her. She trembled in his arms and he murmured soft reassurances, whispering finally where only Dynanna could hear. "Who caught you this time?" He stroked her stomach as if to feel the child he knew was there.

"Kalirion."

"Ah. Now many things make sense." Hadjys lifted Dynanna into his arms and carried her to his pavilion, settling among the pillows with her. "At the request of Kalirion, I sent our paladin, Talons Trollbane, to execute an apostate priest who had become sa'necari. Among a list of heinous crimes, Kalirion made an odd comment concerning a lady he would not name whom this sa'necari had insulted by calling her an 'idiot'. Would that be you?"

Dynanna nestled deeper into Hadjys' arms, nodding against his shoulder, seeming thoroughly and oddly chastened.

"Did he catch you stealing or did you go to him?"

"I needed information. I – I traded."

"It must have been very important for you to submit to his rough handling again."

Dynanna nodded into his shoulder.

Hadjys kissed her face, starting at the top and working his way down to her lips where he lingered. "My poor darling. Dynarien is making us wait. Perhaps we should make him wait." She nodded again. Hadjys rose, still holding her. He turned to Talons, speaking loud enough to be heard this time. "We have things to discuss in private. Ask Dynarien to be patient when he arrives."

Then he carried Dynanna off to the far end of the garden, disappearing into the trees. He found a cozy spot and laid her down, stretching out beside her. He caressed and kissed her with infinite tenderness, knowing he would probably be giving her a second child that day to reside with the other beneath her heart. Her unbridled fertility was one of the issues that kept them apart. They had discovered early in their relationship that she could conceive more than once if she lay with him on successive days. Since he had a good relationship with the Nine, he decided then that he would consult with Ishla Twice-Gendered about finding a potion to help her control it the way that human women did. He wanted Dynanna for herself, not for the children she could give him: unending pregnancy would eventually destroy her wild

spirit and that would be very sad indeed. He hoped she had cursed Kalirion for his roughness.

Hadjys gently freed one of her breasts from the dress. She moaned softly as he ran his rough tongue over the nipple. Give her a couple of weeks and her body would be past the danger of multiple conceptions, then he would go to her in her garden.

\* \* \* \*

Dynarien fumed, pacing up and down, knowing full well where his sister had gone and what was transpiring. She did not mate with gods often, but when she did he always found himself carrying both their workloads. He wanted to complain, but knew he would feel guilty later: after all she had gotten Kalirion's child trying to help him.

"I take it my granddaughter and Hadjys are trysting."

Dynarien snapped to attention, swiveling around. "Father, what are you doing here?"

Willodarus stood in the clearing, surveying Dynarien, the pavilion, Hadjys' priests, and finally the sack of souls. The ancient god looked like a gnarled and twisted old tree that had mysteriously grown into a man. His skin was a deep, warm brown; his fingers long and twiggy; his hair a long dark forest green hanging to his knees; his face was gaunt and seamed while his eyes were a midnight blue alive with dancing silver sparkles. He wore only a rough loincloth. "I take it your sister is giving me more great-grandchildren?" He chuckled. "The other eight in our grand pantheon are currently in an uproar over her. Most of the females want to lock her up. Ishla has become very curious about her, but means her no harm. Kalirion is desperately petitioning me for her hand in marriage. Badonth is setting traps for her, convinced that if he can get her into bed she'll never leave him. Torrundar is just shaking his head at it all."

"What did you tell Kalirion?"

"I told him Dynanna had to make up her own mind."

Dynarien threw his arms around Willodarus, hugging him tightly. "Thank you, father. Thank you."

"That isn't the only reason I came looking for you. I know she's raiding soul vaults, taking terrible chances as usual. But when Dragonshead fell, I knew I had to find you both. That soul vault predates the Age of Renewal. It's been added to since then, but some of those oldest souls could be dangerous or simply too potent for you to control. I want to sift through the contents with you and take those away."

"I do not see a problem with that," Dynarien said. "What do you think, Talons?"

The assassin stood up and joined them. "I have no problem with it either. We don't want to let loose something that might get out of control and cause harm."

Willodarus smiled at her. "You have not introduced us, Dynarien."

Talons watched as the young god she had written off as an irresponsible rakehell inexplicably blushed.

"Father, meet my partner in crime, Talons Trollbane, joint paladin to Hadjys and Dynanna."

"Oh, so they're doing that again, are they?"

Dynarien's blush deepened three shades. "Talons, meet my father, Willodarus, god of the woodlands and wild creatures."

\* \* \* \*

With more than ten thousand souls it quickly became apparent that this would take days, perhaps even weeks, to settle out. Each one had to be carefully Read and examined: no one wanted to release a monster on the world. Talons watched Willodarus create a gate. The first to come through were his sylvans. Talons had never suspected that sylvans came in so many sizes and combinations of colors: the only thing they all shared were the slanted eyes and pointed ears. The first ones through were a band of Night-Elves, glistening black skin with a sapphire hue and the narrowest slanted eyes Talons had ever seen. Their hair was pale, ranging from pure white to cornsilk. Some had strands of brilliant red and black in their hair. She wondered if that was natural or dyed.

The Night-Elves immediately set to putting up a large pavilion and several smaller tents.

Next came a rush of little people through the gate, laughing and hollering, poking each other, dancing and teasing. At first glance Talons thought they were children. The tallest of them was a female who barely stood taller than Talons' waist. They had oversized pointed ears, gaudy clothes, and backpacks. The female wore black clothes, a pointed hat, and carried a twig broom as if it were a staff of office. She came up to Talons, bowed politely, and extended her hand. Talons grasped it out of reflex. She had a strong grip.

"I'm Sugar Maple," the female said. "Paladin supreme of Dynanna. We're the Badree Nym."

A male, almost as tall as Sugar Maple, wearing a leather jacket and strange glass and leather eyepieces perched atop his leather headgear; pie pans hanging from his belt on tiny hooks, joined her. "Remember me? I'm Pieface. I advised you on that troll."

"Yes. I remember you," Talons said.

"We brought your squires with us."

"Squires?" Before Talons had time to consider that Jysy and Arruth swarmed her, taking her down in the grass, laughing, and searching again for the non-existent tickle spots. "Hey! Get off me! Shit."

Sugar Maple bent politely over the tangle of arms and legs. "We'll be putting up yours and Dynanna's tents."

Just then Talons caught sight of what looked like a thin, whimpering vampire being dragged across the grass by five or six happily chattering Badree Nym, one of whom was trying to force a large slice of pie between the vampire's tightly clenched fangs.

"That's it," Talons said. She threw Jysy across the grass into a bush, and then sent Arruth rolling. "Ground rules: No tickling. No tackling. Good manners and behavior. Act like adults! Otherwise I'm taking both of you over my knee and spanking hell out of you!"

Jysy and Arruth brushed themselves off quietly and returned with solemn faces.

"Furthermore, if you're going to tell people you're my squires, then you're going to act like ones."

"Okay," they said in unison.

"If we behave, can we get some goggles?" Jysy asked.

"What's that?"

Jysy made circles with her thumbs and forefingers, putting them to her eyes. "Like Pieface. That's what he calls them."

"If that's your bribe, I'll pay it." Talons pulled some coins from her pouch, placing two silver pieces in each girl's hand.

They backed off, still looking chastened, but when they were far enough away, they stuck out their arms and ran off, crying "Vroom! Vroom!" leaving Talons looking mystified.

What she would learn later was that a very few of the Badree Nym, one of them being Pieface, could worldwalk and brought back strange objects and stranger stories. The two girls were pretending to be something called an aeroplane.

\* \* \* \*

Hadjys' entourage came last. Talons sat on the grass, watching them emerge from Willodarus' gate. There was really nothing for her to do: Her presence was demanded as a matter of form, since the original agreement was between herself and Dynarien. She nibbled on a sandwich that Jysy had brought her in a lunch bucket along with a small round of nutty cheese, some fruit she did not recognize and a flask of light, sweet wine. Jysy was taking the squire bit far more seriously than her sister.

Shadow creatures with glowing golden eyes carried boxes through. Talons had no idea what they were. She became aware of someone sitting nearby, just out of reach, eating fruit.

"Those are the Shadonmi," a familiar voice said and as Talons turned to see who spoke, she caught the scent of roses.

"Dynarien."

He waved his hands at her palms outward. "I know. No touching. I just wanted to talk. I like watching them come out."

"Can't object to that."

Dynarien smiled. "The Shadonmi are very strange. They reproduce by budding."

"Really?"

"Yes. They're one of the original inhabitants of our world. Several tiny pockets of near extinct races, which were clinging to life, were saved when the Big Nine arrived. The entire race pledged itself to Hadjys. Many of them serve in his Nine Hells. The shadow hounds are another race that was saved."

"I've seen Brundarad. He runs with my friend Hanadi."

"Hanadi Majios?"

"Uh huh." Talons fell silent for a time, and then said, "This whole thing is turning into a circus."

"It always does. Especially when one of the Nine gets involved."

"Like your father."

"Yeah."

"You sound like you don't like these things."

"That is dead on." He grinned at her. "You want to see my quiet spot? No touching."

Just a quiet place to sit."

"Okay."

They walked down the rows of tents busily appearing down the greensward, past some booths where various creatures were offering items and food for sale. They passed a group of Badree Nym dancing around the thin, whimpering vampire. One of them, his black hair slicked back, dressed in a lacy white shirt, a black silk jacket with a wide band around his waist and black pants. When they got closer, Talons saw to her horror that this Badree Nym had long fangs.

"Fangs?"

"Yes. That's Drakengrim. The vampire belongs to him."

"What?"

"Well, it's a long story. That poor vampire thought he was biting into and turning a child. But he'd gotten one of the Nym by mistake. Drakengrim only fangs fruit. But he's been following that vampire around ever since – it's been centuries – shoving pie down his throat at every opportunity. Now the vampire is such a nervous wreck he can't eat anything and blood upsets his ulcers. I suspect that Drakengrim's magic is changing him. All Badree Nym have a poltergeist effect that protects them. But they also have affinities. Transmogrification is Drakengrim's talent."

"This is getting weirder and weirder."

"Tell me about it. But they're Dynanna's folk, not mine. The Nym are very good-hearted, but sometimes their magic and their perception of reality gets out of hand. The vampire has been begging them for centuries to leave him alone. They refuse to believe he really means it and are trying to teach him to play. The Nym are nearly indestructible and their magic is strong enough to take the top off a mountain. Most of it's unconscious which makes it worse. Sort of 'Oops! Your house just fell down. Oh, but I didn't mean to do it.' That kind of thing."

"You mean the stories aren't exaggerated?"

Dynarien rolled his eyes. "They only scrape the surface. But you can understand now why they and Dynanna are so in love with each other."

"Uh huh. I'm going to be stuck here for a while. So I've got to co-exist with them. Suggestions for handling?"

"Ground rules: don't scare them and don't make them cry. Beyond that it's all luck. Or talent. I don't know. I don't think anyone does. Take your clues from their names. They're really nicknames. Pieface is obsessed with pies, especially apple, the sweeter the better. Some of their names aren't benign. Take that little blue haired one

over there. That's Glacier. She works in ice. A rather nasty fishermon read her out one day. Savage and unnecessary. She got to crying so hard ... she was totally broken-hearted ... lost control of her magic and created a glacier which rolled over the fishermon and demolished a nearby goblin village. All without realizing she was doing it."

"I'll be careful with them." Talons thought about that and added, "Dynarien, you're very interesting when you're not trying to seduce me."

"Really?" His whole face brightened.

"Uh huh."

"The Eldari call them ver kinlehlahhan, children of laughter. And they're right. They're really right about that," Dynarien said, earnestly, watching for a smile, flooding her with more trivia.

They reached the edge of the forest on the north end of the greensward. Dynarien moved through the trees like a sylvan, scarcely disturbing anything. They came to a thick tangle of bushes, vines, and ferns. Dynarien dropped to the ground and wiggled through a narrow parting, coming out on the other side. Talons followed him. A river ran there; huge, thick ferns sheltered this spot so they could not be seen from the sides. Dynarien pulled off his boots and sat on the bank, dangling his feet in the water, waving and wriggling them like a kid.

"Now I can tell you secrets," he said. "Move closer."

"No touching."

"I promised, okay?"

"Okay." Talons settled next to him.

"This is strictly because it might help you. But you need to be clever to use it. The Badree Nym do not grow up."

"So?"

"They metamorphose. It only happens if they decide to grow up or if they get so injured they cannot survive."

"I thought you said they were indestructible."

"I said *nearly* indestructible. They form a chrysalis, cocooning to emerge as adults. Their adult form is very different from their childhood form. So much so that the adults do not admit to ever having been Badree Nym. They're a bit stodgy about this. I think this is changing, but that is how it is. If you figure out what their adult

form is and ask for their childhood name, they'll give it to you. Many of the younger adults still harbor fond connections to Dynanna. I think eventually some of them will come back to Dynanna."

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Calling them by their childhood name will get you help when you need it."

"And what is their adult form?"

"I can't tell you. It would make father very angry. Now isn't this worth a kiss? Right here?" He patted his cheek.

"Dynarien, I can't."

"Why not? I won't do anything."

"I can't! I can't touch a male like that."

"You're saying can't, not won't."

Talons nodded. "Don't press me, I really don't want to talk about it."

Bi-kyndi killed males with a kiss or any other intimate contact. Normally the Sharani Readers caught the girls with those odd genes and trained them sexually from about age eleven so that they did not accidentally kill someone. Her grandsire found such training objectionable, despite knowing the risks, so Talons had never been trained. She wished she had been, but it was far too late now: fully mature bi-kyndi were simply too dangerous to train.

"Okay. Can we just sit and talk about others things?"

"Of course."

"Did you see the Night-Elves?"

"Yes." Talons thought about their exotic looks, black-sapphire skin and white hair, often with streaks of red and black, deeply slanted eyes.

"My mother is a night-elf."

Talons looked at him closely. "Really? Then why are you so light?"

"Father got Ishla to manipulate the genes so I would look almost the same as I had in my first life. Night-Elves are only found on the continent of Sealandia, mostly in the kingdom of Imralon."

Talons liked listening to him and found his stories interesting to the point of fascination. This time he told her about himself and, considering his usually carefree nature, the story was surprisingly dark. He was Willodarus' grandson in his first life. Melorien Trosdottir had been his betrothed. They were to be married, but Waejonan had wanted her also. He raped and murdered Melorien. Tros and Dynarien pursued him across the nine continents. They nearly caught him, but by then Waejonan had embraced the Hellgod, Bellocar, and become the first sa'necari. Waejonan ambushed them. Tros was slain outright; Dynarien had been killed in the first act of mortgiefan ever committed. Willodarus found them too late: but the surviving fragments of Dynarien's soul had lingered. So Willodarus gathered the pieces into a gem and saw to his rebirth as his son by a Night-Elf, the demi-god Mariko. There had been one unexpected complication: the pieces, too fragile to hold together, split and twins were born. He and Dynanna were two pieces of the same soul. That was how they always knew where the other one was when they needed to find each other.

"I suppose, if the person who carried the Legacy of Waejonan were destroyed by something like a lifemage or the Spiritdancer, Dynanna and I would both have a complete and independent soul."

"And that's where you got the idea of getting these souls directly into rebirth."

"Yes. But it wasn't until about a century ago that Dynanna and I stumbled on the first soul vault. So that's when it really began."

Talons wanted to lean over and kiss him, but held back. It was just too dangerous.

\* \* \* \*

Dynarien sat morosely in his tent. It was a small tent; just room enough for a simple bed and a chest of clothes. He did everything for himself, refusing to have any of his catkins brought through to help him. It was his way of protesting the extravagance around him. He had stopped going out except to eat or when someone insisted on his presence. He only brightened up when Talons came by. Then they would walk about and talk. Sometimes they went to his quiet spot and sat together. He passed the three weeks it took to sort out the souls in this wise. On the last day, as everyone was packing up, Willodarus came to see him.

"What is wrong? I brought many lovely sylvans to delight you and you stayed in here?"

Dynarien sighed and shook his head, staring at his hands.

"Grandson, if I can help you I will. What is wrong?"

"I finally met a woman..."

"That you really like?"

"Love, father. Love. I think I'm in love."

Willodarus sat down on the chest of clothes and leaned closer to Dynarien. It had been four millennia since Dynarien's beloved Melorien was slain by Waejonan. In all that time Dynarien had had many lovers, but never claimed to be in love. "What is the problem?"

"She can't touch me."

"Can't?"

"Can't."

"Did she say why?"

Dynarien shook his head.

"Who is she?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"If you should change your mind—"

"I know."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### MERISSA

Isranon had built a fire in a pit circled with rocks in the center of the cave and a bed of straw covered by a wealth of quilts and animal skins. Olin and Nevin nested with him, but they left whenever Merissa came to visit, which was frequently. He lay on the bed, cuddling with her.

*It would be so easy to love you,* he thought, and retreated from it into the castle of his silence before he could say it.

She sensed his retreat. "Like the wild cousins, Isranon. Nothing more. I'm not asking for anything more. And then let me feed you."

*Love was not meant for such as I.* Yet he took her face in his hands and kissed her.

\* \* \* \*

Merissa came downstairs dressed for riding and settled at the breakfast table. She

put one bite in her mouth of the eggs Aisha had prepared and got an odd look on her face. She pushed her food around desultorily and finally stopped eating after a few bites. Merissa felt a trifle dizzy and nauseated, but was determined to ride out to the cave again to see Isranon. He had begun talking about going off to join his prince again. Each time he left to ride with his prince could be the last time she ever saw him. Until now she had always assumed he would come back. Seeing him nearly die had sobered her.

Aisha noted this change and came to her. "Are you ill? You're flushed." Aisha put a hand to her daughter's forehead and then her lips to be certain. "No fever. What is wrong with you?"

"Mother ... nothing. I'm just feeling a little off."

"Well, you're not taking off for those caves until the healer has Read you."

"Mother!"

"Upstairs," Aisha growled.

Merissa threw down her napkin and fled to her rooms. She sat down in an old rocker and drew her feet up under her, pressing her arms across her stomach. "I'm not ill," she said crossly when Aisha and old Baroucha arrived.

Baroucha moved to take Merissa's wrist to Read her body and then shook her head. "I don't need to Read her to see it in her face."

Aisha cast the healer a sharp glance. "What?"

Baroucha threw a sharp glance at Merissa. "You're pregnant, aren't you girl?"

Merissa's face filled with misery. "Yes."

Aisha's expression mirrored the war going on inside her. "Whose is it?"

Merissa dropped her gaze. "Isranon's."

Aisha's face softened. "You know that no lycan of good lineage will have you, knowing you are carrying a sa'necari cub."

Merissa winced. "I don't care. I won't marry them."

Baroucha growled at that. "Even for a princess ... a cub out of wedlock is an ugly matter. I could give you something to lose it."

"No!" Merissa bent forward, shielding her belly as if they would tear it from her right there.

Baroucha glanced at Aisha. "I will make up the brew anyway. Maybe after she has spoken to her father she will see reason." Then the healer left.

"I knew you were sleeping with Troyes, but I said nothing to your father. I am certain that he suspected. I did not know about Isranon. Why didn't you use a preventative?"

"Sa'necari... I didn't think I could get..."

"Your father will be angry. He had hoped to make a good marriage for you."

"Must you tell him?"

"Unless you drink Baroucha's brew, there will be no hiding it in time. How far along are you?"

Merissa dropped her head. "Two months."

"You conceived soon after his wounding?"

"Yes. I promised him it would be like the wild cousins ... that I would place no ties upon him or expect anything from him."

"A cub is a powerful tie, daughter. Especially for someone like Isranon. When did you intend to tell him?"

"I don't."

"Foolish cub. Foolish, foolish cub." Aisha wrapped her arms around Merissa. "I don't know whether your father will try to force you to lose it or simply send you away, rather than watch your belly swell with a sa'necari cub."

"Can I go to Isranon one last time before you tell father?"

Aisha thought a moment and then nodded. "Bring Nevin with you when you return. The unborn will need an advocate either way. And I don't want your father charging down on Isranon over this. Claw will listen to Nevin, even when he will not listen to me."

\* \* \* \*

Merissa arrived at the cave late in the afternoon of the next day. She had not been able to take the ride at her usual heedless pace because of the discomforts of her body. Nevin stood up from the rock he sat upon, cleaning a pair of partridges.

"Merissa!" He crossed to her as she dismounted. She stepped into his arms and he

held her a moment.

"You need to come back with me when I leave. My mother requests it."

"What is wrong?"

Merissa looked up at him and could not repress a tiny shine of tears. "I cannot tell you until we have left."

Isranon heard them and emerged. His face lit at the sight of her. He took her inside the cave and they talked a long time, lying on his bed. All sa'necari were Readers and Isranon would have known her secret if he had been less honorable and given to probing. Merissa shivered when his hands ran down her body and lingered on her belly. *Please, please, don't see what is there.*

Then he kissed her as he parted her legs still more and settled his body over hers.

"Like the wild cousins, Isranon," Merissa's voice trembled slightly.

"Like the wild cousins." He entered her and she wrapped herself tightly around him.

Merissa made love to Isranon all night long with a savage, desperate hunger, certain that this would be their last night together. When he finally slept beside her, she gently disengaged herself from his arms, dressed, and slipped out. Nevin was drowsing in wolf-form when she woke him quietly.

"We need to go now, before Isranon wakes."

Nevin did not ask why, merely got his gear together and they rode down the hunters' trace toward the Great House. Once they were well away from the caves, he spoke. "Talk to me."

Merissa hung her head, her dark hair falling about her face.

"Merissa?" Nevin coaxed.

"I'm carrying Isranon's cub. You know the laws. Better a human's cub, than a sa'necari's."

Nevin fell silent. Centuries ago, when the laws had been harsher, Merissa would have been stoned to death for carrying a sa'necari cub. It was always done quietly so that the sa'necari overlords did not learn of it. When sa'necari did choose lycan mates or mistresses, they took them to the cities out of reach of the clan to protect them.

"You want to keep the cub?"

"I am not going to let them hurt my cub ... Isranon's cub. Baroucha was already preparing the brew to force it out of me when I left." Merissa's small hands balled up into fists and she slammed them against the saddle startling her horse into a canter.

Nevin kept up with her. "So Aisha wants me for an advocate."

"Yes. You can't let them hurt Isranon's cub."

"I will try. Claw may decide to call a full council on this matter. Isranon has become the exception to many rules already. Perhaps he will in this also. Or perhaps they will tire of making exceptions and punish you both."

Merissa shivered and began to cry.

"Or he may simply accept my judgment."

Merissa turned her tear stained face to him. "And what would that be?"

"Spare the cub."

Silence held again for several minutes and then Nevin spoke again. "Does my clan-brother know about his cub?"

Merissa shook her head. "I will not bind him with the cub where he does not wish to be bound." She rubbed the back of her hands across her eyes, streaking her cheeks with moisture. "But some day, if he decides he loves me, he'll return ... and I will be waiting for him."

\* \* \* \*

Aisha rose from her place at her loom when Nevin and Merissa entered. "I wish you had not chosen to spend the night," she said, reaching for Merissa who had begun to look apprehensive.

Merissa threw herself into her mother's arms and stayed there for a long time. Nevin watched them thoughtfully, already composing his words. They would not destroy his fur-brother's cub.

"Come, Claw has been up in his study brooding all day. You'll be her advocate, Nevin?"

"I agreed to it."

Nevin followed them upstairs. Claw sat at his desk, an oaken piece of furniture as solid looking as the chieftain. Baroucha sat near him. Her bottles and a glass were on the table as if the decision had already been made. Claw glared at Merissa, and then at Nevin. "This is none of your affair, Lawgiver." He waved his hand for emphasis.

Nevin bore the chieftain's anger without expression or reaction. "I am here as her advocate and the cub's."

Claw frowned deeply, turning to Merissa. "You've been playing the slut ever since the sa'necari arrived. This is beyond tolerating. No chieftain's son will have you. I had hoped for an alliance through your marriage. These are dangerous times and we need all that we can gather."

"Isranon is clan-brother, you named him such yourself," Nevin responded low, forcing them to listen to him by his tone alone.

Baroucha gave him a look of sheerest disdain. "That does not change the fact that the cub is sa'necari. This is how Isranon repays our generosity? He humps our princess and fills her belly? I should have poisoned the bloody sa'necari when I had the chance instead of healing him."

Merissa gave a small cry and knuckled her lips.

"Baroucha has prepared the brew," Claw said. "You will lose the cub immediately."

"I love him. You can't take his cub," Merissa's voice caught and her eyes teared up.

"Isranon is not simply any sa'necari," Nevin began. "He is the last descendant of the Dawnhand. Each time he leaves the safety of our valley, he rides into danger. Each time he leaves could be the one journey that leads to his death. Do you wish to be the one who condemns that lineage to an end?"

Claw shifted uncomfortably. "He is sa'necari."

"He is clan."

"It would be better to let the lineage end so that there is one less sa'necari to deal with," Baroucha snarled, showing her teeth and looking ready to change out of rage. "I say, make her drink. Stone the sa'necari for touching her."

Nevin remained unruffled. "He is the last Dark Brother of the Light. Who are we, who have sheltered them for generations, to say that they are the same as their darker kindred? It is like saying that lycans and lupori are the same because we both become wolves. Yet we are neutrals and the lupori serve Bellocar as do the Nakesht who make wolves of myn for their hunting packs."

"You love the cub, Claw," Aisha spoke up for the first time. "You know it. You always have, since he first showed up here as a skinny little nothing. You used to call him your man-cub. How can you suggest hurting his cub?"

Claw ducked his head. "Awww, bitch," he said with grudging fondness. "Do you

always have to make trouble for me?" He scratched behind his ear.

"When you deserve it, yes."

"Well, then. We can't tell anyone. Not even Isranon. And we can't have her here, a swollen belly will make people ask too many questions."

Merissa smiled tentatively. "I could go to grandbitch's clan to bear it."

"That is a fine idea," Aisha chimed in. "We could hide them there until it became safe to bring them home. We don't want any sa'necari who might come here later nosing around the cub."

Claw nodded. "Go upstairs and get packed, Merissa. You will leave in the morning."

"Yes, Papa."

Aisha slipped her arm around her daughter and walked out with her.

\* \* \* \*

Nevin returned to the cave alone after seeing Merissa off. He found Isranon working with his blades as he did each day. He removed his saddlebags and walked into the cave, carrying them. Isranon followed.

"Why didn't you tell me you were leaving?"

Nevin shrugged. "There was no time. The matter was urgent."

Isranon nodded to that. "Did you handle it?"

"Yes. Else I would not be here."

Isranon sat down on the pallet he slept on. "Did Merissa say when she would return?"

"She isn't."

Isranon looked disappointed. "Maybe I should ride down to manor."

"She isn't there, Isranon."

Isranon's disappointment turned to concern. "What do you mean, she isn't there?"

"Claw discovered the nature of your relationship and sent her away."

The expression of utter devastation on Isranon's face tore at Nevin. "I didn't mean

to hurt her. I could talk to Claw."

"I talked Isranon. She had me for her advocate. Neither Claw nor I can or will say more than that. She has been sent away and she will not be returning."

Isranon bolted to his feet, and ran from the cave. Nevin went after him to be certain that he would not do anything foolish. He heard him crying in the trees. Nevin briefly considered going to him and then decided against it. Let him get it out of his system. This was for the best.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### UNCLEAN

Aejys woke in the wee hours, shaking and sweating from a nightmare she could not remember with Brendorn's name on her lips. The darkness seemed to press in around her. She wanted to run away again as she had eight years ago. Let them chase her if they could, but leave everyone else alone. *That vow, that stupid vow, it was gone, but she felt just as trapped as she had when it wrapped tight around her. I left them; I thought I was making it better for them, that they'd be safe without me. But they weren't. They weren't! They're all dead... because I would not stand and fight. I thought I was keeping my honor, but I wasn't. I was just saving my own skin. I didn't want to hurt ma'aram. I didn't want to see her cry. What does it matter if I have courage on the field but not in the home? I should have killed Margren and then myself. My life be forfeit to my liege-god if I break this vow. I should have broken it and died.*

*I did die. Josiah brought me back. Healed me. It hurt so bad to die. The pain frightens me. I've never hurt so bad. Not even the viper's bite. The venom... For the first time in my life I am afraid to die. Possibly to rise undead. To hurt like that again...*

Tears ran freely down her face. She looked over at Josiah sleeping deeply beside her. *Oh Sweet Gods! What is wrong with me? Have I lost my nerve?*

She slipped out of bed, careful not to wake Josiah. Dree, sleeping at the foot, roused and watched her. She pulled her night robe over her head and dropped it on the floor. Her trousers and tunic lay draped over one of the over-stuffed chairs. She managed to pull the trousers on with difficulty; her twisted hands did not want to grip and forcing them hurt. But she got the ties pulled together. Only her thumbs and one forefinger worked at all. She had to grip the end in the webbing between her thumbs and palms to pull them together. She got them tied and pulled her tunic over her head, thankful that she did not need to tie any thing else. She threw on her cloak and forced her feet into her boots, then went out.

Dree followed her, meowing distress. Aeijys scooped her up and tossed her gently back into the room before closing the door. Then she went down to the stables.

A hostler answered her shout, peering sleepily from the loft.

"Saddle me a horse," she ordered crisply.

He came down and looked about. "Ye shuna go out alone, lord."

"That's none of your affair, just saddle the damned horse."

"Yes'm."

He got the horse saddled, waited for her to get out of the barn, and headed for the Cock and Boar. As he mounted the stairs, he heard the cat yowling loudly from Aeijys' room. The upstairs was stirring in response to Dree's misery. Josiah emerged with Dree riding on his shoulder.

"What's going on?" Becca asked.

"Aeijys is gone. I think that's why Dree is putting up such a fuss." Josiah replied, and then he spied the hostler.

"Yup," he said. "Her lordship ordered a horse saddled and took off."

"Do you know where she went?" Josiah demanded.

"Uh uh."

"Brendorn's grave," Becca said. "That's where she went last time."

Josiah tried to move Dree, but the cat dug her claws in and yowled. "Okay, Dree. If you want to come, you come."

Dree purred loudly.

Josiah was beginning to think there was more to Dree than just a simple cat. He went back in and retrieved the little flask of whiskey Taun had returned to him, shoved it into a pocket, and headed for the stables.

\* \* \* \*

Aeijys sat cross-legged on the grave, dragging her ruined fingers through the dirt. Grass grew all around it, a few patches springing up near the headstone. Before spring was out the grass would cover it completely. She had had no more visitations from his spirit since Dragonshead. The grass seemed like one more barrier between them. When it covered the grave would he be gone forever? She loved Josiah, but

she missed Brendorn. Brendorn had died because he loved her, because he had put his life between hers and Farendarc's. Would she lose Josiah too? Tamlestari? The children? Would they even be born?

"Brendorn, for the first time, I'm frightened. No, not the first time. I was terrified after Bucharasa. But it wasn't like this. It wasn't all the time, every minute. I could get past it. Now, I can't. It just sits there in my stomach, sour and aching. It never goes away."

Tears rolled down her face, angry, frustrated, and desperate. "It never goes away. Hell Shitting Damnation!" She folded her arms across her stomach, bent over them and rocked slowly. "My hands ... my hands. People flinch when I touch them. It makes my stomach queasy just to look at them."

Aejys stilled with a deep, shuddering sigh, forcing herself to look at them. They were twisted, ugly, and useless. She could not even defend herself, much less the others. Tag could do a better job of taking care of her people and her loved ones than she could. They did not even need her, and they were in jeopardy because of her. "What the Hell can I do? I've made new vows to stop Margren and yet what can I do? Take more people into danger?"

Then she thought of Molly – dear sweet Molly. Before Brendorn came; before the march to Shaurone; before she was taken by Margren, she had always been down in the common room at closing time ... had her hands and body been whole, she would have been there that night and Molly would not be dead ... so much death. "My damned hands!"

A soft, warm body wrapped around her and she started from her thoughts as Dree climbed carefully over her hands without hurting her and up onto her shoulder. "Where did you come from?"

Dree purred loudly, rubbing her face across Aejys' cheek. The sound felt comforting, easing the paladin's heart. She began to feel better, listening to the little cat.

"I brought her," Josiah said softly, kneeling beside her and taking her into his arms.

Tears started again at his touch. She pressed her face into his shoulder. Dree moved from Aejys to Josiah, still purring loudly. Aejys poured out her misery in his arms. He listened and held her and kissed her until the nightmares receded.

\* \* \* \*

Talons sat on the benches on the edge of the training grounds watching Jysy and Arruth face off against some of the older students in hand to hand combat. The Sharani youths were agile and quick, good at avoiding blows and throws, but less than satisfactory at delivering them. Talons regarded their efforts thoughtfully, she

could see the way their hit and run lifestyle as thieves and street children reflected in their fighting. They were picking up the movements of the kata, but then did not seem to know how to implement them on the field. She decided to try and find time to work with them herself. As their sponsor, Talons was expected to show up and watch them from time to time except when she was on assignment. The two youths, once they began their classes, settled in well. The teachers were still evaluating them, trying to find the holes in their education. At least they were literate and their bookwork was decent, if not outstanding. Talons appreciated the fact that the 'kiss and tell' stage had been passed as soon as the newness wore off. Jysy and Arruth were now into an 'anything you can do, I can do better,' mindset brought on by the fact that males outnumbered them three to one in their classes. They proved good enough that the armsmaster put them to running the obstacle courses with the older students. That played to their strengths as street kids. They crawled, climbed, swam, and ran while taking out their targets with small ranged weapons, mostly daggers and throwing stars.

In the evenings they hit the books without complaint, soaking it all in. As glowing reports trickled in, Talons felt a swell of pride in their abilities and no longer spent as much time wishing she could have had Birdie. They were going to be very good. When it came time for their first kill, Talons would go along as backup. They had attempted their first kill when they dropped that noose around the stone troll's neck and tried to throttle him. The result had been to get themselves knocked silly by the monster, but they had nerve. Best of all, they no longer had either time or energy to ambush Talons: no more embarrassing playful assaults.

When reports from comrades in Shaurone came in about Birdie, Talons began to think she had in fact made a good choice taking Jysy and Arruth instead, for the thirteen year old was becoming a fine priest, watching over her burgeoning flock with the care and thoughtfulness of someone twice her years. When she heard about the planned move to Rowanhart, Talons sought and was granted a favor from her grandsire that two Guildsmyn be insinuated into the ranks of the settlers to watch over Birdie.

"They're pretty good."

Talons looked and saw Dynarien sitting next to her. "Yes, they are."

"They still giving you fits?" He grinned.

"No. I think having to act as my squires at our little party had a sobering effect."

"I wonder why?" He asked with just a tad of feigned innocence. Dynarien could well imagine what that little episode could have led to.

"Perhaps it was being expected to entertain the Badree Nym. Maybe it was seeing and interacting with strange creatures and beings. Or maybe just the strangeness of the entire thing."

"There is that."

"Hello, Talons," A young man about Talon's age walked up, he moved with an easy, almost boneless grace like a cat. Darkly handsome with a small tuft of hair on his rugged, cleft chin, he regarded Dynarien, measuringly. Although the Guild recruited from all over the Merezian continent, Dynarien's almost translucently fair skin and red-blond hair stood out like the proverbial crimson fish. "Who's your friend?"

Talons' eyes hooked the newcomer's with a quick, unspoken warning of 'don't mess with him.' "Bryndel, meet Dynarien."

Bryndel gave her an almost imperceptible shrug as Dynarien stood and extended his hand. They shook.

"You're not from around here." The statement had just a tiny challenge in it.

Talons allowed herself a tiny smile. Bryndel Wrathscar was a bit of *akizmeigo*, always trying to show that he was better than everyone else with an ego that was larger than his talents, although his talents were substantial. However, the Guild had chosen not to accept him into their ranks and he had been dropped from Guild classes, although he was still allowed to take non-Guild classes and still came to work out with the non-Guild students. Most *kizmeigos* were all talk and no talent. But if he were going to pull a *kizmeigo* with Dynarien, he was in over his head.

"I'm not." Dynarien answered, his face guileless.

"Then where?"

"Bryndel..." Talons scowled. "You're out of line."

"That's okay," Dynarien said. "I'm from Imralon."

"Yeah, right," Bryndel sneered. "All kidding aside, where are you from?"

Dynarien's mouth twisted with mischief. "Talons, I'll be back. We need to talk." He snapped his fingers and disappeared in a shower of rose petals.

Bryndel yelped. "He's a mage?"

"No. He's from Imralon. Think about it." Talons knelt and scooped up a handful of the lovely blue rose petals and walked off. She put the petals to her nose and inhaled their fragrance. *If I could have a male I think it would be Dynarien*. The thought of touching him sent a tingle to her loins and a bittersweet longing to be with him. But they could never be more than friends. Never. She could never touch a male that way, not with her uncontrollable bi-kyndi. To touch him would be to kill him. She

had never felt drawn to a male before. She had always been comfortable without one; her lovers had all been female. Edouina, her beloved Edouina Hornbow. They had been lovers since childhood; since that first, tentative, almost shy exploration of each other's bodies. Although she had had other lovers, she always came back to Edouina. For the last two years, they had settled down into exclusivity. They were thinking of handfasting. Yet Dynarien filled her with longing and need. Like the majority of Sharani, she was bi-sexual, she had to be, and it was in her genes. It took three parents to make a viable offspring. Two parent children were born neuters. But as an untrained adult bi-kyndi she would never be able to triad.

\* \* \* \*

Talons caught the scent of roses as soon as she entered her rooms and looked about for Dynarien. The antechamber contained a table and chairs in the middle, a desk along one wall, a small wood stove, and several cabinets. She stooped, glancing beneath the table and then the desk, when she noticed a small trail of rose petals leading into her bedroom.

"Shit," she muttered, "you're playing games again." She walked into the bedroom and saw the lump under the blankets. She walked up and kicked it.

"Ouch!" Two voices cried in unison. Jysy and Arruth boiled out from beneath the blankets.

"Serves you right, get out of here. Aren't you supposed to be in class?"

The two youths fled, laughing.

The scent of roses was stronger. She started kicking cushions about. One of them exploded, filling the room with feathers, swirling around her like snow.

"Hi!" A voice spoke behind her and she spun, claws out.

There was no one there.

"Come out!" she demanded.

"No. Not unless you promise not to kick me."

"Truce."

Dynarien shimmered into view in front of her. "Hi," he said, settling among the cushions. "Sorry about the pillow. I'll replace it if you'd like."

"You didn't rip the pillow, I did."

He sighed, ducking his head. "You would not have ripped the pillow if I had not

been playing games with you. Jysy and Arruth knew I was here."

Talons stiffened. "You didn't touch either of them, did you?" she growled.

"They're not exactly virgins..."

"We're not talking about them! We're talking about you."

"I did not touch them. I didn't even kiss them ... although they wanted to... They're children."

"So is Birdie."

"Birdie's different. It had to be Birdie," he said, desperately wanting her to understand and forgive him. "It had to be."

"Why?" she demanded, mercilessly forcing him to talk.

"Because ... because the soul she's bringing into rebirth. It's Eldarion Havenrain."

"Holy sweet death and damnation," Talons muttered, dropping onto the cushions beside him, utterly confusticated. The mage-smith and founding sire of the Valdren race. Surely there could not be two of them. "You mean the Valdren?"

"Yes," he said, unhappily. "I was not supposed to tell anyone. Just give her some hints and guidance. Birdie's mage-born on her sire's side, she's got Valdren blood four generations back on her 'lasah's side, and she's the first Sharani high priest of Dynanna. She also has a large enough street-wise clan and extended family to protect the child so the sa'necari can't get him before he has a chance to grow up and become a threat. We were going to give her two more souls... But I don't break my promises. We are going to do it right this time, not mess things up like we did with Josiah Abelard."

Talons found her anger draining away. "Tell me about Josiah Abelard."

Dynarien poured out the whole sordid story. He had not lain with Merann; instead he had given the soul gem to Tori Stormbird and instructed both of them in how to bring the soul into Merann's womb at conception. Then he and Dynanna got caught up in other things and forgot to check back. They thought the child would be safe in the Neridians, far from contact with most other landsfolk. By the time they went looking for him, they found Josh half-grown and already severely damaged. After that they quarreled so often over Josiah, that they finally quit talking about him. Dynarien had no idea how to fix things. He managed to find a bandage solution a few months ago when he discovered that Josiah Abelard had finally awakened completely in Josh's body, but only when he drank heavily. The last drop of Sapphire Elixir had merged their personalities, but much remained damaged.

"Poor Josiah..." Talons said, looking thoughtful and considerably calmer. "Couldn't you let Lizard engender those souls? After all they're married now."

Dynarien shook his head. "My blood and genes make the children harder to damage magically. They also heal faster from physical damage."

Talons reflected for a moment. "That makes sense."

Dynarien nodded and launched into Dree's story, following it up with what Aeijys was currently planning and then the condition of her household. By the time he ran out of things to tell her, he felt certain she was no longer angry and he brushed his fingers across hers. She did not pull back; her assassin's mask had fallen away completely, leaving just a tiny crack of sadness in the corners of her mouth.

"There cannot ever, ever be anything between us, Dynarien." She stared down at his fingers still lightly touching hers.

"Why? Because of Birdie?"

"That was part of it, but it isn't any longer. No."

"Am I so offensive to you?"

Talons ran her fingers lightly, longingly across his face. "Because I can't. I can't have a male in my life. Ever."

"Are you geised?"

"No."

"Cursed? My grandfather could fix that."

"Not exactly. If I could have a male in my life, I think it would be you. But I can't. We'll just be friends. Very, very good friends, but still just friends."

"At least that's something."

"Yes, it's something."

\* \* \* \*

Talons carried her plate to a long table in the far corner of the dining hall. She could have eaten with her grandsire and his court, but she preferred to take it with the students and masters. The atmosphere was more relaxed here and it gave her an opportunity to see her friends. Jysy and Arruth always joined her there.

"Mind if I join you?" Bryndel set his tray down before waiting for her answer.

"No." Talons watched him, closely. Bryndel rarely sought her out and he never did anything without a reason – often several of them.

Bryndel started eating and eying her in an odd way. "So tell me about him."

"Him?"

"The mage, Dynarien. There's a rumor going around about you and him. He's been at five of the last practice sessions with you."

"There's nothing going on. And he's not a mage."

"Oh, come on, Talons. He Jumps. He's a mage."

"He's not a mage. He's an enchantary."

Bryndel shrugged. "Whatever. Look. We think you should stick to your own kind."

"My. Own. Kind." Talons tensed. She did not like where this was going. It smelled of politics and manipulation, things she scrupulously avoided. She did not know how to play the game, because she had not wanted to play it and still did not.

"Yes. Now that you're finally interested in males."

"I'm not interested in males," Talons said flatly. From the corner of her eye she saw that Jysy and Arruth had arrived and were quietly listening.

"Oh, come on! We've all seen how you look at each other. You're Sharani, for Havens' sake. You swing both ways."

"Well, I don't." She caught a small glimpse of Jysy and Arruth finger-speaking under the edge of the table, but could not quite make out what they were saying.

"You know how I've always felt about you," Bryndel leaned closer to her, almost whispering.

Talons had known. He had never pushed it like this before, but neither had he made a secret of it. Talons had never encouraged him. She wondered what was going on to embolden him like this. Jealousy perhaps? Or was someone encouraging him? Someone who stood to gain from a match between them. Talons remembered suddenly, that with the recent deaths of her male cousins, she was the only heir left. She had never considered it. She did not want to be heir, so she had kept pushing it out of her mind.

Jysy grinned at her sister. "*If we do it we get in trouble,*" she signed.

Arruth grinned back. "*We do it!*"

Jysy went over the table and Arruth went under. Jysy grabbed Bryndel, planting wet, sloppy kisses on his mouth and face. Bryndel tried to pry her off him, then stiffened as a hand pulled the band of his pants open, shoving something very wet and stringy down the front. He erupted from his seat, throwing Jysy off, knocking the bench over as he seized Arruth by the collar and slammed her against the wall hard enough to stun her.

"You little shits!" Bryndel snarled into Arruth's face, his mouth frothing with spit. "I'll beat the hell out of you!"

Talons stepped in, broke his hold on Arruth, and spun him around. Bryndel found himself staring down the length of her claws. "Don't you ever touch them or threaten them again. They're children."

"But ... but..."

"No. Touch them again and I'll rip your throat out. Furthermore, what I do or don't do is none of your business. Dynarien is none of your business. Ask the Patriarch. Or better yet, the old lore books. Under Rose Warrior."

Jysy and Arruth retreated to their side of the table, wide-eyed at the reaction they had gotten.

"You are my business, Talons," Bryndel said as she sheathed her claws and released him. "My father is petitioning your grandsire on my behalf. I'm going to marry you."

"It will never happen."

\* \* \* \*

That afternoon Talons was summoned to her grandsire's office in the west tower of the palace complex. His three lieutenants were with him: Mohanja Raam, the black-skinned giant from Jedrua; Hanadi Majios; and Gylorean Galee, the nordrei.

"Just because no means to block the bi-kyndi has yet been found, does not mean that there is not one," Galee said thoughtfully. "I have made arrangements to travel to Ishla's Great Temple in Laurendar. I will consult with the priests and if luck is with me, the God herself."

"Talons," her grandsire, Takhalme Gee said, "you are the last of our family. I must have great-grandchildren to hand this down to. Lord Wrathscar has made me a very good offer in allying our houses. In two days time I will publicly announce your betrothal."

Talons felt stunned. "You promised me..."

"That was when I still had six grandchildren. Now I have just you. I am too old to start another family. There will be no more assignments for you. You will remain in Creeya and allow Bryndel Wrathscar to pay you court. And I want your oath that you will do absolutely nothing to harm him while does so. Nothing. No matter how obnoxious he might seem at times. That's just the way young men are."

Talons bowed her head. "Yes, grandsire. You have my word." She felt as if she had just been wrapped in unbreakable chains. She knew from his tone that he would brook no arguments or protests from her. She had not been given a choice and the state must be served: she understood that with her head, but not her heart.

"Within six months I expect to hold the wedding. Lord Wrathscar and I have worked out nearly all of the details of dowry and inheritance."

\* \* \* \*

Talons did not return to her quarters to change for dinner, although she was expected to attend. The south wing was, to those who knew its real purpose, the Guild wing. Only one person who lived there was important enough to have lived on the west wing with the nobles: That was Hanadi Majios. Talons found Hanadi in her chambers with Brundarad.

The great shadow hound beside her 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.

Hanadi's chambers were simple and unpretentious. Talons knew her to be a mon who placed more value on things of the spirit than of the flesh. Hanadi looked up when Talons entered. Her stern, conspicuously Euzadi features, creamy matte brown skin, long, straight and blade thin nose and her strong jaw were all assembled into an aristocratic package of proud mien. She faced the heir to the throne with her casual arrogance in place.

"What is it you need, Talons?"

"Hanadi, you have to help me."

She shook her head and her auburn to the point of black hair cascaded around her face. "I cannot. My wanderyear begins this night."

"Can't you put it off?"

"No, child. It is impossible. The enchantments involved are complex."

Hanadi had never spoken so frankly with her about it before. Talons had always assumed – as did everyone else – that the wanderyear, which came every seven years, was just an informal roaming about with Brundarad. She never suspected that magic was involved. "I don't understand."

Brundarad gave a small bark and then some strange noises that sounded like words.

"We will show you. Long have we spoken of this and decided to trust you. Brundarad is impatient anyway." Hanadi removed her clothing a piece at a time, folding and putting them away. When she stood completely nude, she turned toward Talons. "If a shadow hound can help you, then send for us at the monastery of St. Tarmus. But as a mon, there is nothing I can do for you until next spring." Hanadi dropped to all fours. Her form shimmered and changed. Soon two shadow hounds stood before her. The bitch pressed her rough head against Talons and the assassin heard a voice in her mind.

*<For a year, I must live as a hound. It is the pact. We will produce a litter. By the end of the year the pups will be fledged and bonded. Then we will return. >*

*<You must not speak of this,>* Brundarad's coarser mind-voice told her. *<Outsiders must believe I and my kind are simply very bright animals. >*

"I promise. It is our secret."

Then they bounded out the open window and disappeared into the bushes.

\* \* \* \*

Before Brendorn had come looking for her nearly a year ago, Aejys had never been one to brood, now it seemed pretty much all that she did. She had hoped that sharing it with Josiah would have helped, but it had not. She had decided one thing: she had to make some arrangements in case she failed, in case she could not stop Margren. Others would have to follow in her steps. Up until now every time she even began to get her feet beneath her, Margren or her allies knocked them out from under her again. At one time she and many others had considered her a master strategist, now she no longer thought of herself that way. She had been out-fought and out-maneuvered from the beginning. The only evidence of good judgment had been in her choice of allies and shield-friends who had managed to make up for her failures, but she feared that the time was coming when even they would not be able to help her. For the first time in her life she judged herself to be the weakest link in their armor. Furthermore, without Tagalong and Clemmerick, she wondered just what she could accomplish.

Most of the fingers were stiff and unresponsive. The thumbs had survived the impact nearly intact, letting her grip a bit. The forefinger on the right hand worked in an awkward fashion. She could feed herself as long as someone cut her meat for her. She could handle a horse's reins by wrapping it around her palm; a weapon was out

of the question. Yet, in some ways the worst of it was the way that people, those who were not of her household, looked at them or tried not to: the sight of her hands made them uncomfortable.

Aejys found Dree a surprising comfort, always purring and nestling against her: the little cat never winced away when Aejys touched her the way people frequently did. Even the bouts of despair and depression were not as bad once the calico curled up against her. Some indefinable quality in the cat's purring tended to pull her out of it as if the small creature laid a comforting touch in her mind and heart, turning her from fits of silent weeping to smiling and renewed hope. She appreciated Dynarien's gift and wished she could have thanked him in person, but she had as yet only met him in what might have been a fever dream from the venom or might not: her memory was not clear enough to say.

She could not figure out why a god, even a minor one like Dynarien, would send her a cat. Aejys owed Dynarien; he had kept her alive with that tiny drop of elixir in the 'might-have-been-dream', and then sent Talons with the antidote and the cat. The cat had to have some significance. She desperately needed advice and information; especially about whether her soul had been damaged and become unclean as well as where or even if healing could be found for her crippling and, if not, how to stop Margren and Mephistis in spite of it.

That morning was particularly bright and sunny, a good day to look for hope from another source. It's time, she decided. "Josiah, help me get into my cloak and riding boots."

"Where are we going?"

"The Willowhorn Shrine."

"About your soul? Whether it's unclean?"

"Among other things."

Josiah got her dressed and they went down. They passed Becca on the stairs.

Josiah now carried a longsword of his own, not the consecrated weapon with which he had slain Cedarbird. Aejys liked to watch him working out in the mornings, amazed by the change in him since his two incarnations had finally become fused. Josiah Stormbird was still the man she had fallen in love with, only more so. If Tamlestari approved, then they would hold a formal triading.

He chose a table, and gestured her to sit. While Aejys still ruled in matters of ownership, politics, and policy, the others ruled in matters of physically accomplishing those things, hovering over her like a flock of wild hens. Josiah was both the best and the worst of the 'hens'. He packed their kit for the ride, and then arranged for servants to get them down and put enough food for four days, two

days more than they needed in case they had to take it easy, into saddlebags and fetch the bedrolls.

They had sent word to Tagalong and Tamlestari by way of some wind-folk who ran a discreet and expensive messenger service, hoping to catch them before they set out. The two were strong-willed enough to have set out with the first thaw despite the fact that the children were due in late spring. Aejs had also let her small privy council (Becca, Taun, Skree and Josiah) know about the children, that they were hers. She informed Skree that she intended for he and Taun to be their godfathers.

\* \* \* \*

"I want to see you in skirts," Bryndel told her peevishly.

"Why?" Talons demanded. "So you can get between my legs faster?"

"Oh, there is that." Bryndel leered. "But I will be getting there eventually. The engagement will be announced tomorrow."

Talons stiffened as he moved closer, practically pressing her against the soft padded arm of the couch. His arm slid around her and he pressed his lips to her neck. Talons shoved him away. "Don't touch me."

"Oh for gods' sakes, Talons! Loosen up."

"No. You and your father have been informed about my condition. I'm bi-kyndi. Until we hear back from Ishla's temple, you are not to touch me."

"I'm sick of hearing about this bi-kyndi, bullshit. It's just an excuse to keep your legs crossed. I know for a fact you were not keeping them crossed with *him*."

"So now we're back to Dynarien."

"Well, I guess we are. You know, you could do far worse than me. After all I do love you."

Neither of them noticed the faces watching them closely from outside their third story window. Jysy and Arruth stared in, suspended by crude rope harnesses they had secured to a chimney.

*"I don't like him,"* Jysy signed.

*"Me neither."* Arruth signed back. *"I'm glad we're not nobles."*

*"Yeah."*

*"I want to fix him."*

*"Let's do it."*

Then they climbed back up.

\* \* \* \*

Josiah insisted on taking an easy pace, yet by midday Aejs was already worn. She hated letting him help her down. He had gotten her a well-trained "ladies" mount the previous month, anticipating this. She resented that, but said nothing, not wanting to hurt his feelings. There was still much of Josh's hypersensitivity in him. The horse knelt on command, making it easier for her to dismount. She hooked her wrists on the pommel and cantle and slid from the saddle with Josiah steadying her. She hated that too. It stirred the feelings of helplessness that had haunted her since she awakened in Vorgensburg with her hands splinted. Josiah laid a blanket over the new grass springing up along the roadside, then set out a lunch of sweetbread flavored with dried fruit while he sliced chunks from a small round of sharp cheese passing them to Aejs. Her hands shook as she forced her twisted fingers to grasp and then lift each morsel to her lips. They ate in silence, Josiah watching her intently. When she finished, Josiah filled and lit her pipe, handing it to her and holding on until he could tell she had it firmly.

"I know it's hard. But you are managing better than you realize."

Aejs did not answer. He leaned close, took her face in his hands, and kissed her forehead. "Aejs, beloved. Listen. Please. You are managing. It will get better."

"My hands ... this didn't have to happen."

"Aejs. I'm sorry. I was drunk. I should have stopped them."

"It wasn't your fault."

Josiah frowned. "Who are we talking about?"

"My ma'aram. Myself. I tried so hard to do the right thing. To be noble. Honorable. Everything she expected of me. I gave everything I had. It never seemed to be enough."

"We don't have to talk about this," Josiah said, putting his arms around her. "If it hurts."

Aejs shook her head, and then lifted it, fighting back tears mixed of anger and grief. "Let me get it out."

"I'm listening."

"I loved Margren. She was a sweet child. She changed. I used to wonder if it was something I had done – or not done – that caused it. No matter how good I tried to be..." her voice caught and for a moment she struggled with it. "When Kaethreyn forced that vow on me, she practically called me a liar. I felt like she was. I felt ashamed. I made her cry. I couldn't bear that. So I swore to her on my honor and before my god that I would never do anything to harm Margren."

"She knew that at the end. After all she killed Margren. She released you from that vow."

Aejys nodded, sucking a deep breath, and letting it out slow. "You should have seen Margren's face ... it haunts my dreams ... when she shoved that blade in. kept shoving it in... She looked ecstatic. As if she had never been so happy before in her life." Aejys let Josiah pull her tightly into his arms, sobbing, then stopping, fighting for control. "Since the day I made that vow, I stopped feeling loved. I love. I have loved. But, deep down inside, I just can't seem to feel loved."

"I'm sorry."

"No. I'm sorry. It isn't anything you did. I guess I just felt so abandoned. I grew up feeling loved. Tried to live up to her every expectation. And I thought that I had. I thought that she loved me. And then suddenly out of nowhere she tied my hands and hung me out to die. Not literally. You understand what I mean. Then when I was trapped in Bucharsa and I prayed to my god to help me ... when there was no answer. I felt abandoned all over again. I stopped feeling loved. Now – except for brief moments – I don't think I'm capable of feeling it."

Josiah hugged her again. "Come on, let's pack up. I'd like to make the shrine before dark."

\* \* \* \*

They started their journey beneath the canopy of spruce and fir which dominated the rainshadow east of Vorgensburg, then gradually lost their sway to white fir and willow as the land rolled down into the deeply recessed water hollows stretching like dark fingers toward the south. They reached the Willowhorn two hours before sunset, dismounting in a willow thicket surrounding a small stream. Aejys led Josiah through the trees to a small clearing beside a waterfall. The shrine seemed to rise out of the earth itself, a log building with a roof tiled in muted gray and green. The doorframe and edges of the roof were thickly adorned with seasonally discarded deer horns.

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 Aejys' arm. "I am sorry, but you cannot enter," Suthana Willowheart told Aejys.

Aejys hesitated, and then crumpled to the ground, her arms across her face. Josiah started toward her, but the priest waved him back. She knelt beside Aejys, taking the paladin in her arms and holding her while she shook, small sobs escaping.

"I learned to pray." Aejys' voice was low, shaking, catching repeatedly in her throat. "I made peace with her... She took me back."

"I know," the priest murmured. "I know how hard that was. How hard this must be—"

"You don't know. You can't..."

"She has not abandoned you. I can smell the undeath clinging to you. You cannot enter."

"She took me back."

The priest sighed. "This is not something you did. Or even that she did. She has not turned her back on you. This is the law as the Nine have written it. You cannot enter a temple, except to die. It would be a desecration. When a temple is desecrated, then the evil one can enter."

"Can you cleanse me?"

"No. That is beyond my powers." The priest took a long, white horn on a leather strap from around her neck. "She sends you this." She hung the horn around Aejys' neck.

"What is this?"

"A holy relic from the Age of Renewal. The Horn of Sephree. Your triton will know it. She also sends you this word "trust the cat."

"The cat?"

"The cat is your guide. She can take you to something that will set you free. The sa'necari fear this thing even more than they feared the lifemages. She also asks that you both..." The priest looked up at Josiah, gesturing him to join them. "You must both give me your sworn word that you will trust the cat completely and without reservation. Do you so swear now, before Aroana's shrine with Our God in your hearts? Say it."

"I swear it," Aejys answered.

"And you, Abelard?"

Josiah had a moment of startlement at her knowing him, then remembered Aejs telling him that Suthana was an oracle and channel. "Yes. I swear it."

"When the cat reveals herself to you, she will be in great danger. Margren and Mephistis will know she lives. They will try to destroy her."

"Who is she?" Aejs asked.

The priest smiled, a twist of sadness at the corners. "You must ask the cat."

"Dynarien sent her to Aejs as a gift. Is she catkin?" Josiah asked.

"You are a perceptive mage. She is catkin. Newly brought over."

"Can we dance around the edges here?"

"Around the edges? Yes."

"Is her tribe pledged to Dynarien?"

"Yes. As Dynanna has her Badree Nym, so her brother has his catkin."

"Then why has she not made herself known? She has been with us for months now."

"You will know that when you ask her."

"Okay. How firmly is she in her service to Dynarien?"

"You ask about her loyalties?"

"Yes."

"She wishes to become his paladin. So strong is her faith that she would gladly die in his service. She has left her young children in the care of another to come to you. She loves her children, but she knows her duty. Now this is at an end. You may camp here for the night. But you cannot enter the shrine itself."

Suthana rose, shaking out her robes, and re-entered the shrine.

Josiah got the bedrolls down and laid them out together.

"What do you know about catkin?" Aejs asked.

"Not much. They are one of the few races whose minds cannot be taken by the sa'necari. Torture cannot break them. Faced with it they will themselves to die. Their spirits resist becoming undead. They travel in little tribes or clans. Hate being alone."

"That is a lot."

"Hmnp!" Josiah snorted. "You would not say that if you were a mage. Shall I list what *Idon't* know about them?"

"No. I want you to remind me you love me. I want you to keep reminding me until I know it in here as well as here." She touched her heart and then her head. "Make love to me. Chase the nightmares away."

"Get under the blankets with me." He crawled into the bedrolls and she followed. Josiah removed her clothing, then his own. "I love you," he said.

"Show me."

He started with her ruined hands, kissing and licking gently. He moved up her arms, then down her body, leaving nothing unknissed. He pressed his face into the black thatch between her legs, licking and sucking until she moaned and wrapped her legs around him. Josiah worked his way back up to her breasts, his cock teasing the lips of her womanhood. She reached down and guided him in, her thumbs and palms substituting for her useless fingers.

"You're getting good at this," he said, and then covered her lips with his before she could respond.

\* \* \* \*

Josiah packed up at first light.

"I understand pain," Josiah said, quietly, soft and hesitant. "Grief, terror... They have been my earliest companions. When my parents died ... when he burned the magic out." He held Aejs as he spoke. "There is no shame in feeling these things. You taught me that nearly four years ago, trading me nightmare for nightmare on the bluffs above the wormhole."

Aejys lifted her tear-streaked face to his and their lips brushed. Josiah shamed her in his very gentleness, he could have – most would have – become as violent and hostile and indurate as those who had hurt him, but he had not. She kissed him. Then again deeply.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### THE CAT

Yukiah Woodbourne, the armsmaster, paired Jysy off with her sister that morning for unarmed sparring. They were working on their throws when Arruth spotted Bryndel walking onto the field and gesturing at the armsmaster. They spoke quietly

for a while, and then the armsmaster came toward the pair.

"Don't look now," Arruth whispered. "But he's here."

Jysy glanced surreptitiously. "What the hell?"

"You, Arruth," Yukiah called. "Lord Wrathscar wants a word with you."

"Me? Why me? I didn't do it!"

Jysy started to follow, but Yukiah caught her arm and held her back. "Not you. Just her."

"Like Hell!" Jysy darted forward, executed a startling roll, and went right between the armsmaster's legs as he tried to grab her. She came to her feet running, raced off the field and into the hall. Bryndel and Arruth were nowhere to be seen. She glanced about, hearing footsteps behind her. She whirled to find three of the older students coming toward her.

"Hold up, Jysy. You can't just run off the field like that."

"Get away from me." She ran again and they followed. Something wrapped around her legs, tangling them and she fell hard, twisting around to struggle with the leather cord of the bolas around her ankles.

"Look, kid," Jimi said, kneeling to retrieve his bolas. "We're not exactly knights in shining armor, but if you've got a problem with Bryndel, you ought to tell us about it." Jimi was a scruffy, light brown-haired youth of fifteen, with a roguish smile that concealed an iron-will and a well-disciplined mind. He came from the eastern steppes where they hunted giant, flightless, predatory birds from horseback, armed only with javelins and bolas.

Jysy felt half-mad about him, but he never seemed to notice. She rather hoped, now that she had turned thirteen, that he would begin to look at her as something more than a scruffy street kid. She desperately wanted to trust him. "I think Bryndel's going to hurt my sister."

\* \* \* \*

Arruth was shaking by the time they got to Lord Wrathscar's chambers. *After all* , she thought, *I'm the one put the noodles in his pants* .

"This is the one?"

*Dynanna help me, it's the noodles!*

"So, child," Lord Wrathscar said, rising from his chair and coming around the desk

to get a better look at her. His eyes raked down her, pausing at her modest but well-shaped breasts and then at her loins. "You say she's only eleven? She looks older."

"That's the way it is with Sharani, father. They mature young."

"We're not going to hurt you. We just want some answers. My son and I do not know a lot about your people."

"Okay," Arruth said in what she hoped was a chastened voice.

"What do you know about the bi-kyndi? Explain it."

"Why is it supposed to be so dangerous to males?" Bryndel asked.

Arruth wavered for an instant between the truth or turning it into a really tall tale, and then decided on the truth. "The kyndi is not meant to be experienced by males. They don't have enough pleasure centers to diffuse the energy so it burns them out. The bi-kyndi rouses equally with males or females."

"You mean they die of pleasure?" Lord Wrathscar asked.

"Ecstasy. In a male it's sheer ecstasy."

"So, father, think you, if a male were strong enough. Might he then survive this pleasure?"

"Don't go putting your rod in me." Arruth spit at him in a flare of defiance before she could stop herself. "I'm not bi-kyndi."

"But Talons is," Bryndel said. "And she says she's not trained."

"Touch her and die." Arruth spit at him again and this time her aim was better.

"Little shit!" Bryndel wiped the spittle from his face and knocked her across the room.

Arruth lay very still, her mind racing. Her lip bled and she resisted an urge to tongue it. Bryndel knelt beside her, feeling in her neck for a pulse. She moaned softly as he moved her, letting her eyes go unfocussed. "She's alive," Bryndel said.

"That's something. We don't need trouble. Not that I expect there to be any. She and her sister are always doing risky stunts. Take her down to the infirmary and tell them she fell."

"I don't want her remembering this little interview," Bryndel said, pulling her pants down around her knees.

Arruth felt a sharp prick high up on her inner thigh like a needle entering the skin. The world swam and she blacked out.

\* \* \* \*

Josiah quietly locked the door behind them, hoping the cat would not notice his doing so. The calico lay curled up the middle of their bed. Aejs settled next to her, stroking her brightly colored fur. Josiah joined her there, studying the cat.

"Show us your other face, little catkin," Aejs said.

The cat jumped off the bed, turned round once and changed. Her body shimmered into translucence, reformed into a human of middle height with large, round, slitted eyes. There was something very familiar about her face despite the catkin eyes.

"Juldrid."

"Yes, that's who I was."

"Margren's Juldrid?" Josiah asked uneasily.

"Yes. I prefer my catkin name, Dree."

There was something about Dree, both wistful and sad that tugged at Aejs. Part of her wanted to be angry with Dree because she had been Margren's na'halaef, part of her pitied Dree. "Tell us why you are here."

Dree curled up on the floor. "Margren changed. Mephistis encouraged that. He made her sa'necari. She turned on me, forced her child on me, and then gave me to Mephistis. He terrified me. Forced a second child into me, his own and not Margren's. I wanted to die, but the catkin and Dynarien would not let me. They brought me over. The catkin pretended loyalty to Mephistis while spying for Dynarien. They betrayed Dragonshead to Tagalong. Showed her the secret entrance."

"Why did you wait so long, Dree?"

"Two reasons. First, the instant I took human form Margren would sense me. She'll want my kittens. They're both mage-born. She'll kill me to get them. My clanmother agrees they must be protected. Margren must not get them, she'll teach them the dark ways."

"And the second?"

Dree looked down in her feet, a small secret smile on her lips. "Dynarien said not to change until either you asked me or the spring thaw came."

"You are holding back," Josiah said. "Just give us all of it."

Dree smiled at him in a timid way that reminded Aejs of Josh before he and Josiah merged into a single person. "I know where the Spiritdancer is."

"Spiritdancer?" Aejs questioned.

"A sword," Josiah told her. "A relic of Eldarion Havenrain, the magical smith to the gods. She is sentient after a fashion, speaking in dreams and emotions. To draw the blade from the altar stone you must come to her wounded and in need. She then draws upon the entirety of your genetic heritage, reconstructs you ... she ... Aejs, your hands! She could fix your hands, cleanse your soul. You would become different, better, but still be yourself, like reincarnation without dying first."

Hope surged up in Aejs. "Is this true?"

"Yes," Juldrid said. "And Spiritdancer is the only thing the sa'necari fear more than the lifemages. When a necromancer dies by this blade all the souls he has taken are freed. The dead he has raised are released to the wheel and cannot be recaptured. Those whom he shattered with mortgiefan are healed and no longer wander the world in torment."

"What do you get out of this?" Josiah asked.

"A favor from Aejs."

"What?" Aejs dropped into a cross-legged position in front of her.

"Sanctuary for myself and my kittens. Protection from Margren and Mephistis. My tribe wishes to migrate to Vorgensburg."

"Not Vorgensburg. Not here."

Dree's eyes filled with tears. Aejs drew the catkin into her arms. "Rowanhart, across the bay. I'm building my own kingdom there, remember? You and yours are welcome in Rowanhart."

"Excuse me," Josiah said, breaking in on them. "But where do we find the sword?"

"Norendel – The Valley of Carliff, the Mad Lich. He is a good and honorable lich. My clan has taken refuge there."

"I have heard many strange things about him."

"Not all of them are true," Dree said, a trifle defensively. "He defends the living against the Waejontori. And he does not prey on them either."

"Josiah. I don't want to make a long journey like the last one. Can you Gate us there?"

"It's not Gating, it's Jumping. I can't create Gates, but if one is nearby I can borrow it. Shift it or split it. I can only Jump between places I have been before, beloved. What borders this valley?"

"Vallimrah and Waejontor," Aejys told him. "Shaurone, also, but you can't get over the mountains from there without going through Lord Hoon's valley."

*Hoon! That was his ward-piercer they found in Dingarim's shoe.* Hoon had gotten through Josiah's wards and killed him in his previous life. Hoon murdered his halaefs, Shularrien and Nariya, as well as their son. With his dying breath he had cursed Hoon and swore that he would return into his own bloodline to destroy the vampire. His face darkened for a fleeting instant, then cleared. "Vallimrah then. I can jump the three of us, maybe two others as far as the Oak of Sorrows. It will leave me exhausted. We will need to pick up supplies and horses there."

"Can we take anything with us?"

"Small backpacks, weapons. Nothing more. I wouldn't tell anyone about her relationship to Margren. Skree would cut her throat. He's rabid about anyone involved with the sa'necari."

"You just became my cousin Dree. On my lasah's side. Can you handle that?"

Dree smiled. "Yes."

\* \* \* \*

Galee joined the Grand Master in his study, carrying a satchel on her arm. "I've returned with the medicine. The bi-kyndi can be tamed. Talons can now continue your lineage."

"Good," he said, looking up from some papers. The knowledge that his lineage would not end with Talons reassured him. He regretted having to break his promise to her of a love-match and force her into a political union. But relief and joy overwhelmed his regrets. He felt a deep gratitude to Galee. She acted as his lord lieutenant in the Guild, but she was not truly Guild. He had given Galee her position thirty years ago by fiat. It was a good decision, although both Hanadi and Mohanja had opposed it. She had just served him in a way that no one else could have.

"I think you should encourage them to sleep together before the wedding, to test it."

"That's not a choice I can make for her, Galee."

"But you will suggest it?"

"If it makes you happy, Galee, I will suggest it."

"After all the trouble I went to to get it, I'd rather it did not sit on the shelf for the next six months."

"As you wish, now go away. I am tired."

Galee turned and bowed herself from the room. Once outside her lips curved into a smirk. *Yes, I imagine you are tired ... and you'll get tired and tired.*

\* \* \* \*

Jysy and her three companions walked quickly toward the suites held by Lord Wrathscar. Another student came on them in the hallway.

"Jysy," the newcomer told her, "Arruth fell on the stairs, she's in your rooms. The healer put her to bed. I think you ought to get over to them."

Jysy looked stricken. "He hurt her."

The newcomer shook his head. "No. He just wanted to talk to her but she bolted and fell on the stairs."

Jysy started to protest, but Jimi hushed her. "Come on." They broke into a run.

They found the healer just settling Arruth into bed. Being Talons' protégés, the two youths had a suite of rooms near hers in the west wing, the best wing of the castle. As soon as the healer was finished, Jimi turned to the other boys. "Wait in the parlor," he told them.

They obeyed and withdrew,

Jimi closed the door, and then threw the blankets back. He started removing Arruth's clothes.

"What are you doing?" Jysy demanded suspiciously.

"Looking for something."

"What?"

Jimi raised his hand and thumbed a large ring on his forefinger, a needle appeared. A tiny drop of fluid beaded on the needle. "A tiny spot that could have been made by something like this, somewhere no one would look and only a lifemage could find the shit in her."

Jysy set to undressing her sister completely and searching her body. Jimi went through her under clothes. He was about to give up when he found a tiny spot of blood on her under pants. It was so tiny no one would have thought any thing of it if they had not been looking for it.

"Jysy." He extended the underwear to the girl. His thumb right next to the blood.

Jysy looked up at him frowning.

"They probably did it in the thatch," he said, looking down at the wealth of dark hair covering Arruth's loins. "We'll never find the entry point."

"Is she poisoned?" Jysy felt frightened. Until then their campaign against Bryndel had been a simple lark—suddenly it had turned dark and dangerous.

"No, the healer would have found that. It was probably something to block her memories, so she could not tell what they discussed with her. Bryndel probably hit her. Bastard!"

"I ... I can't believe ... the Grand Master would ... would force Talons to marry someone like that."

"Just between you, me, and the doorpost, Jysy," Jimi told her in quiet, low tones, "there's rumors, he's sick. Healers are calling it old age."

"Poison?"

"No. Readers would catch that. It's something else. They might be right, but I don't think so. Talons' last four cousins died together when an avalanche destroyed their winter hunting lodge. The other one disappeared on assignment. It happens. And avalanches happen. But it's too pat. Now politics are in full swing." Jimi covered Arruth with a blanket.

"What do I do?" Jysy asked.

"Not you. We. Come on, Tulik will stay with your sister. I think it's time you met the Knights."

"Knights? You have knights?"

"We call ourselves the Knights of Shining Justice."

Jysy thought about that. "Sounds kizmeigo."

Jimi flushed. "Yeah... I mean, I guess so. Kind of pompous? But we're not kizmeigo. Not really. I mean."

"That's okay," Jysy took his hand and patted it. She leaned in and kissed him full on the lips, feeling him go weak-kneed.

He recovered himself and said, "Come on."

\* \* \* \*

Talons sat with Bryndel in the Music Chamber, a cabaret and canteen maintained to keep the students on campus. A stage dominated the north end with round tables in the middle and booths along the edges. The Guild did not want their holy assassins-in-training wandering the city until they knew whether Hadjys would confirm them or not.

"I have the medicine. I thought maybe you'd consider..."

"Sleeping with you? No. I don't want you. This is being forced on me. You will wait for the wedding before trying to climb between my legs."

"Talons, please, I love you."

Talons gave him a long, hard stare, rose and swept out onto a balcony. She leaned on the railing, looking down on the quad, watching students crossing; the scattered groups of nobility standing among the trees and flowering shrubs, deep in conversation; the ever present guards around the edges. She sucked in deep breaths, surprised to find herself shaking with anger. She had not found herself in a situation – at least since early childhood – that could provoke a reaction like this. Her grandsire had suggested she try the medicine. Then Galee had. She felt furious over it. *I'm supposed to be nice to him. They aren't making it any easier.*

"Talons?" Bryndel stepped out beside her, carrying two glasses of red wine. "I apologize. Maybe we could just talk."

Talons forced herself to soften. She accepted the glass he extended to her and drank slowly. "This is not a love match."

"I know. Are you in love with someone?"

"Edouina. We were planning on a handfasting." Talons thought of the taste of her loins, the way her elegant hard body felt wrapped around her own. "Edouina." Even as she said it, her thoughts drifted to the irascible Dynarien. Edouina would approve of Dynarien – but not of Bryndel. Edouina would break Bryndel like so much kindling.

"I thought all Sharani triaded."

"Most do. If it were not for the problems with the bi-kyndi, we probably would

have."

"Would Edouina like me?" Bryndel asked, sounding hopeful.

"I don't know. Are you suggesting we triad?"

"If it would make you happier. Yes."

"That would make me happier." Talons blinked, feeling dizzy, like the wine had gone to her head. She turned and her feet slipped, throwing her against Bryndel. He caught her.

"I think you've had one too many," Bryndel told her, smiling oddly – almost smug.

"I guess I have." Did he put something in the wine? The medicine? Talons' found her mind sliding away into an unfamiliar giddiness, her awareness blurring. Then she kissed him.

\* \* \* \*

Dree moved into Josiah's old room. She stayed in human form, as she needed to be able to communicate with the others and her cat form no longer offered her any protection since Margren knew where she was: she had sensed Margren's awareness of her the moment she left it. The catkin – in their cat forms – could not be scryed by anything short of a full oracle, and those people were rare: Her sons were safe from scrying so long as they remained kittens. But should they take human form, they could be found. Hah'nah, her clanmother, had promised to prevent their changing until they could be brought to safety in Vorgensburg or somewhere else along the northwest coast. Normally they learned to change in the same way that a human child learned to walk, by natural experimentation. Dree missed her kittens; they had just opened their eyes when she had to leave them. Another young mother had taken them to nurse with her own kittens. Dynarien used magic to dry up Dree's milk, concealing the existence of the kittens from Aejs' household.

Aejys had gotten her a lute and she sat in the middle of the bed, playing soft, melancholy tunes, waiting for them to fetch her for the meeting of Rowanhart's council. *Rowanhart*. Dree liked that name. She had seen the new livery design, three rowans and a bounding, broad-antlered hart, and she liked that too. Aejs was everything Dree had once believed she had found in Margren: strength, steadfastness, and compassion. Thinking about it made her even sadder and her chording reflected it. Either those things had never been there and she had imagined it in her emotional neediness; or she had simply not been able to give Margren enough love and so she had changed; or Margren had deceived her and she had fallen for the deception. Her thoughts and feelings danced through those possibilities like her hands across the strings. The first two brought feelings of shame and the last of anger. She could not hold onto any one of them for long. Hah'nah told her she would sort it out eventually, that such things took time, but Dree found that advice to

be poor comfort.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts.

"Come in," Dree said.

Omer stepped in. "They're ready for you, Dree."

Dree settled the lute among the pillows and slid off the bed.

"That was awfully sad music," Omer said.

Dree nodded. "That's how I feel."

"They're not going to hurt you."

Dree shook her head. "Wasn't what I was thinking about."

She followed Omer down the hall to the main meeting room.

Aejys sat at the head, flanked by Josiah and Skree. Taun sat between Skree and Omer; Becca sat beside Dree on Josiah's side of the table.

Skree started the questions: he wanted to know everything leading up to Dree's finally revealing her true nature. Dree began by telling of the horrors of Dragonshead as she had witnessed and experienced them. By the time he finished interrogating her, Dree was in tears.

"I think we should break," Becca said, putting a comforting arm around Dree. "We don't punish the victims here."

"But we need to know they are indeed victims," Skree responded.

"Dynarien would not have sent her if she was a threat," Aejys pointed out, rising from the table and joining Becca at the end. The paladin took Dree into her arms and held her a long time, letting her cry herself out. "I know what you're feeling. I once loved Margren, also."

Josiah sat down beside Aejys.

Aejys looked up at his touch. "I want you to take her to the Willowhorn. I could not enter, but Dree can. You stay with her, every minute. You can enter also."

"That's going to add two more days to our departure."

"I know. But Dree needs to work some things out before she will be the kind of help we will need on this little sally."

"Okay."

"Go now. Don't waste a minute."

"This will help me?" Dree asked.

"Yes."

"One horse. I'll take cat form so Margren cannot track us."

"Smart girl," Josiah said.

Dree wiped her tears, slipped from Aejs' arms, and dropped to the floor. Her form shimmered, went transparent, then solid. The little calico cat was back.

\* \* \* \*

Josiah rode hard this time with Dree perched on his shoulder. They reached the Willowhorn by early afternoon. The priest was sitting in the glade, weaving a necklace of flowers and grass.

She took them to a small scrying pool behind the waterfall. With a wave and a word, a picture appeared and a story unfolded. They saw Margren and Aejs, the former just six years old, the latter ten. They saw them playing with other children in a snow castle. Aejs decided to play something else. Margren begged them to stay in the snow castle, but Aejs won out and the children followed her off leaving Margren behind.

An older child appeared, a boy of about eleven. He had not been with the original group. He held Margren for a while, and then led her off into the shelter of a wayward pine. He nuzzled the little girl's neck. His fangs flashed, and then sank into Margren's neck. The scene changed several times, showing always a winter landscape and the boy, Mephistis, and Margren each time a little older. Each time he took blood from her.

When Margren looked about eight or nine, Mephistis took out a blade and cut his arm. He pressed the bleeding wound to Margren's mouth. She sucked on it, then raised a happily blood smeared face to him. The scene skipped to Margren and Mephistis beneath the same pine. Margren's body was still not fully mature, but Mephistis appeared to be around fifteen or sixteen. Dree guessed Margren's age at around ten or eleven. They shared blood, and then he opened his pants and hers, and entered her. The pool glazed over in soft blue and cleared: the scrying was ended.

Josiah became aware of Dree weeping softly against the priest's shoulder. "There was never anything anyone could have done different. The die was cast before anyone knew."

"She said she met me first, but she didn't. She'd been lying with him, sharing blood since childhood. She never really wanted me. She..."

"Dree," Josiah said. "She could have loved you also."

"No. She couldn't've. She just wanted a womb for her children. She knew how I was. She knew I would never've even considered handfasting with someone involved with a sa'necari. She knew it. My ancestor, Carliff suffers under an undead curse, he and his household guard the valley, defend the living, and each night they pray for forgiveness and release to true death. Every night until I ran away – I was fourteen – I heard their cries and lamentations, their pleading with the gods for release. Only a priest or paladin of the Lineage of Rowan can release him."

"So you went looking for the Rowans and found Margren."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you talk to the others?"

"Because Margren said not to. Later she said they had all refused and would break up our relationship if they knew I was descended of Carliff. She said they would kill me."

"So then you were too frightened to speak."

Dree hung her head. "Yes. She said a necromancer, a close friend, would find a way to do it. That was Mephistis. But they never intended to do it. Later, I caught them talking. I confronted them. They told me the dead were to be ruled, not released. Now the Rowans are all dead – except for Aejs."

"Can the rule be taken from Carliff?"

"I don't know. Mephistis seems to think that if he can reach Carliff's castle in the north that he can wrest control from him. He's spoken endlessly of such possibilities."

"This is bad," Suthana said. "Very bad. If he took the valley, then the Waejontori could strike at Vallimrah. Carliff's valley borders on the fireborns' breeding grounds. The Waejontori could possibly destroy the fireborn themselves. Or their breeding grounds. That would be just as bad. With the fireborn gone or heavily reduced in numbers, the dragons would come back."

"You must not let that happen," Dree said.

"I am not sure how to do that," Josiah replied, shaking his head slowly.

"Aejys must get the sword. You must secure that castle, mage," the priest said. "As only the living can."

"I'll try."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### JULDRID

"Your young friend is alive," Lord Hoon told Mephistis. The prince lay in bed, recovering from an especially bad attack following an argument with Margren. Like so many illnesses that had their origins in rite, ritual, and magic, Mephistis' attacks could be set off by strong emotions, especially anger or rage.

"Isranon?" Mephistis asked hopefully, sitting propped against many pillows.

"Yes. But we had a time of discovering it. Claw and his people are hiding him very well and never leaving him alone."

"They've always been very protective of him. Their lawgiver, Nevin, is his guurmondru."

Hoon steepled his fingers, tapping them against his lips as he thought. "I have never heard of that happening. Humans are indiscriminate, teaching any who have a taste for it and an ability. Not so our folks, yours, and the lycans. We keep our teachings to our own species. And did you already know they named him clan-brother? A first I think for a sa'necari."

Mephistis took another swallow of Sanguine Rose from the glass on the bedside table. "I did not know about the clan-brother. It must have happened after we parted company and I sent him to Claw with a companion to ward him."

"Sa'necari companion? They are hiding him in a cave with a bleeding table in front of it. My lycans say they smelled old sa'necari blood upon it. Might they be hiding him because he ate his companion?"

Mephistis stiffened and took a long swallow from the glass before answering. "No. Isranon would never do that."

"How can you know that? The youth is, after all, sa'necari. There is no question of that. You know your people."

"And I know Isranon."

"Your Isranon sounds like a very strange sa'necari."

"He is."

"You care for him very much. As much as for Margren?"

Mephistis finished the glass and sat it on the table. "These days, I think I may well love him more."

Hoon smiled. "Were you lovers?"

"What exists between Isranon and me is private, Lord Hoon."

"As you wish. If there is nothing more that I can do for you, then you should rest, my prince. I have a magical working planned for tonight that I will need your assistance with."

Mephistis nodded. "Thank you for checking the rumors. I look forward to assisting you." Then he closed his eyes and settled into the bed, shifting several of the pillows to the side.

Hoon watched him slip beneath the pleasant tugging of Sanguine Rose, knowing the troll blood cocktail with its arcane drugs to be highly addictive. He had not shared that information with the prince.

\* \* \* \*

Bodramet availed himself of the castle gardens. Hoon rarely went here and neither did Mephistis much. Margren, however, came often in search of her assignations or new delights.

The garden was a delightful mix of flowering hedgerows, many up to twelve feet high.

He saw Margren slip into a green curtained alcove near the inner walls with Juqwach. So now she was fucking trouble as well. That female had set sail on an endless voyage of appetite. The potential for going rogue existed in all forms of dead. Generally the wiser ones destroyed those insane ones. Margren definitely showed the symptoms to those who remembered what she had been like as a living female.

"That one is wilder than any necari I have known. Hungry too," a new voice said at Bodramet's elbow.

He turned to find a vampire standing there. The male wore a bearskin cloak thrown back which matched the generally hirsute aspect of his stocky, powerful body.

"I haven't seen you before," Bodramet remarked.

The vampire extended his hand. "I arrived from Minnoras this morning. I'm called Haig. I left some of my nibari here to be bred and it is time to retrieve them if they've all caught. Lord Hoon owns several of the finest nibari studs in all of the realm."

Since the newcomer clearly expected him to accept his hand, Bodramet grasped it and shook quickly. "Yes, she's wild. She belonged to my prince in life. I wonder who she belongs to now that she's undead."

Haig gave a long, harsh laugh and ran a hand through his unkempt, coarse black hair. "How like a woman."

Bodramet frowned. He was not certain that he found that funny. "She only became sa'necari a few months before they killed her."

"If they, and I assume you mean Sharani, killed her, why didn't they burn her?"

"I rescued her body before they could do so."

Haig frowned, raking his fingers through his hair again and then pulling at his coarse beard. "And she rewards you by screwing everything in sight? Ah, mon, that's women. No gratitude."

Bodramet replied a tad stiffly, "I am not certain all females are so ungrateful." This situation with Margren gave him an uneasy feeling. He began to see treachery in every direction among those who were close to him.

Haig gave a bellowing laugh. "Perhaps not, but I could tell you some tales that would grow hair on your palms."

Bodramet grinned, beginning to like this odd vampire. "I would like to hear them sometime."

"Why not now? I've nothing to do before morning. My private nibari are waiting in my chambers and I have put back several bottles of wine and blood in interesting vintages. We could have a tiny little party. Just us and my seven nibari. I made two very fine acquisitions before I left last time and neither, I am told, has caught yet. You know how it is, nibari are a bit skittish and fragile once they catch. But they settle down. So there's at least two females and a couple of interesting mules I can offer."

Privately owned nibari in Hoon's castle? Was Haig highly placed and perhaps someone he should cultivate? "Why not? Lead on, friend Haig."

Haig never stopped talking as they walked through the halls to a section of the castle Bodramet had never entered before. "I was the High Lord of Oakleigh's youngest son three hundred years ago and I've never lost my taste for the good life."

Bodramet entered the sitting room of Haig's suites and caught his breath sharply when he saw the lovely blonde nibari he had met at that party of Hoon's. He sucked air in through his flaring nostrils. "You."

The nibari blushed prettily.

Haig grinned. "Ah, so you've met my Nainee?" He went over and kissed her forehead with his eyes closed. Bodramet knew the vampire was Reading her. Haig raised his head with a stern look. "For shame, Nainee! You're not pregnant yet. I bought you as a breeder to improve my stock, not just look pretty."

Nainee dropped her head until her chin rested on her chest in the most subservient, yielding position she could assume, presenting her neck to the vampire who owned her. "Forgive me, Master. I have been trying."

Haig stroked her a moment. "Well, perhaps this will work out after all. You can help me entertain my new friend, Lord Bodramet. You do have a taste for Nainee, don't you?"

Bodramet's fangs showed fully. "Most assuredly."

"However," Haig paused to wag his finger at Bodramet. "If you swell her, you'll owe me two hundred gold for the child."

Bodramet laughed. "I have no children yet. If I swell her, I'll give you three hundred for the child."

"Very well, until I need to move on to my estates in the south, consider my Nainee loaned to you. Nainee, break out a bottle of the best for us. And some white for yourself."

\* \* \* \*

"She took my ma'aram away from me. Now she's turned Juldrid. She's stealing my children." Margren paced about the tower room in a loose black robe that swished against her legs, pausing to stare from time to time at the scrying mirror lying in the center of the pentagram. She had felt it when Dree assumed her human form and then scryed them.

"You don't know the shielded one is Aejs," Mephistis said, struggling to sound patient.

His placating tone angered her. "Who else would it be? Who. Else. Would. It. Be?"

"She is right," Hoon said, rising from a chair set in the corner. "We have not been able to scry her for months now. Twelve mortgiefan and you have not sensed her. Her mages have shielded her very well."

Mephistis nodded. Hoon's efforts and knowledge still staved off the effects of deijanrael, but sometimes the pain was near to breaking the Waejontori prince. It worsened with time, demanding greater and greater amounts of drugs, death, and blood to ease it. But for the fact that necari could not be king; he would have killed himself to find relief in undeath. When he suggested it, however, Hoon had pointed out that undeath would not cure him: deijanrael would wither his undead form into dust. Only the mortgiefan of Aeijys Rowan could cure him. That or a greater death – such as a yuwenghau. Hoon knew a certain pair of twins, brother and sister, that he would dearly love to see Mephistis devour and had suggested that it might be possible with help from a powerful ally to get him one of them.

A sudden, searing pain started in Mephistis' loins, ripping through his body and doubling him over. He cried out as he stumbled to the ground. Margren grabbed him, dragged him into her lap and pressed her lovely undead face against his, weeping bloody tears. "Help him, Hoon."

Hoon fetched a preserving bottle from the shelf, containing the Sanguine Rose, a troll's blood base laced with heavily refined powders of poppy, pollendine and cactus buttons, among other arcane and very rare substances: a dangerously addictive cocktail. Nothing less had been strong enough to ease the prince. He measured five fingers into a cup, returned the bottle to the shelf, and knelt beside Margren, taking Mephistis from her. He tilted Mephistis' head, lifted the cup to his lips. At the first taste of blood, Mephistis responded. After three swallows, he was sitting up, drinking. Give it half an hour and Mephistis would be floating in strange, waking dreams.

Hoon stroked Mephistis, the vampire had not been much of a Reader in life, but in his undead state this had improved. He sensed the hunger in the sa'necari. He turned to Margren. "If your highness would be so gracious as to have the captain send up three full meals – or will you still be dining from our plates?"

Margren giggled. "You always leave the best parts for me." She found the vampire's habit of referring to their victims as meals and such quite charming. "I will include wine."

"As you wish."

\* \* \* \*

"Father?" Timon knocked upon the door and then entered. He did not like being here in The City of the Dead. The debauchery of this place always offended his sensibilities. He preferred the quiet estate he had retired to near Minnoras. Yet, whenever his father called, he always answered. He was the good son and good sons often had to suffer for their fathers. He accepted it, for he was a mon of duty.

"Come in, Timon."

Hoon emerged from his bedroom wearing only a short black dressing robe wrapped around his nudity and loosely tied so that the sash settled around his narrow hips.

"You have invited trouble into your home, father."

"I knew that when I invited the prince. What kind of trouble, Timon?" He poured himself blood and mixed it with wine. "Do you wish some?"

"No, thank you." Timon settled on a chair at the small table. "I sent for Haig, Dane Jayce, and Nainee. Haig is here now. He sent Nainee on ahead of him."

Hoon drank from his glass deeply. "I saw him yesterday in the gardens."

"Dane refused to come. But he sent me his reasons at length and I replied to them. Margren has apparently never been stable. So she could be going rogue. Isranon is a young sa'necari, not more than eighteen. His powers, for reasons Dane did not elaborate upon, are weak, yet he found favor with Mephistis. Dane thinks highly of this Isranon, but would like to see the youth protected and kept out of political matters."

Hoon's lips curled up sardonically. "This Isranon gets stranger all the time. I have rarely heard of vampires protecting sa'necari, and never heard of Dane doing it. Go on."

"Margren is jealous of anyone who climbs into Mephistis' bed, but has no compunctions about climbing into others besides his. She tried twice to murder the youth with Bodramet's assistance. And she was sleeping with Bodramet while still living. Dane tried to get Isranon to leave with him, but the youth refused out of devotion to Mephistis."

"Devotion in a sa'necari? Phahhg," Hoon made a disparaging noise. "It does not exist. So they are the source of their own rumors?"

"Yes, father. And if you're wondering whether Isranon is Mephistis' catamite, he isn't."

"And what does Haig say?"

"Haig says that it's mostly jealousy. Bodramet refers to Isranon as 'that half-a-mon' and Margren as 'the bitch who owes me.' What they have in common is Mephistis. Bodramet became very drunk last night. Haig laced his blood wine with troll's blood and poppy milk. Bodramet became very forthcoming. The sa'necari believes that Mephistis has the Legacy, and so does Haig. Bodramet wishes to steal it from Mephistis through mortgiefan. We will need to prevent that."

A smile spread across Hoon's face like sunrise. "Finally! Finally I am close to what

I always wanted. Control of the prince who carried the Legacy."

"You say you intend to heal him. If you heal him, how will you control him?"

Hoon laughed. "One thing at a time, my son. One thing at a time. First I must make Aeajys Rowan come here. Then I must take Mephistis to Minnoras and introduce him to Anksha."

Timon laughed at the image of Mephistis meeting Anksha and imagined the pleasure of listening to him scream. Yes, he would enjoy that. He hated all sa'necari and had no sympathy for those who became Anksha's blood-slaves.

\* \* \* \*

Hoon brooded silently while Mephistis raged about the small ritual chamber. He was growing tired of the petty sa'necari prince; but as long as the prince had his uses, Hoon would supply his needs and desires. Margren nestled against the vampire, watching her mate through half-parted lashes.

"Dingarim is dead! And those damned mages have shielded the bitch so tightly I cannot get past them."

"You must calm yourself, my prince," Hoon said silkily. "These rages will only make your need and pain worse. It will quicken the effects of the deijanrael."

Hoon nodded at the preserving bottles on the shelf behind the pentagram. Margren rose and took down the bottle of Sanguine Rose, pouring six fingers into the chalice on the working table. The fact that it now took half again what it had at solstice to ease him spoke worlds to Margren. She brought it to Mephistis.

The prince stopped pacing and accepted the chalice. He drained it, wiping the back of his hand across his lips. His body eased and his face calmed. He closed his eyes, feeling the warmth flow through his veins and nerve endings. He was growing more and more dependant on Sanguine Rose to keep the pain away. On bad days he would feel his powers fraying at the edges with the increasing deterioration of his body.

It had not escaped his notice that as his condition worsened, Margren spent more and more time with Hoon – his lovely undead Margren was deserting him. She had not been the same since he raised her. That had never happened before. The undead were supposed to be the mirror of the living – especially the necari – perhaps Margren had never really been his to begin with.

"You should rest," Hoon told him. "Let me think and plan. I will find a way to bring Aeajystrys Rowan into your hands. Should she escape our reach, I will find you a greater death for your healing."

"Thank you." Mephistis walked out, leaving Hoon alone with Margren.

Margren curled up against Hoon again. The vampire ran his hands over her body, feeling the intense warmth. "Have you fed today, sweet one? Are you full of nice hot blood?"

"Yes," Margren moaned as his hand slipped under her shift to stroke her loins.

Hoon nuzzled her throat. "I know your plans do not match with your mate's."

"They don't. Ummmnnn..." She sighed as his fingers slipped into her. "I want her undead. My toy. Not his. I want to watch her eat her mates and children."

"There is a way. Do you still possess the hilt of your blade?" He eased himself from under Margren, settling her on the couch while he opened his trousers. "When we have sated ourselves, I will charge it for you. Then all you need to do to force her directly from life into undeath is to press it between her breasts. After that, no matter what happens, she is yours."

Margren's face glowed. "But we must not tell him about it."

"Of course not. It is our little secret." Hoon knelt on the couch as she opened her legs to him. *You will betray him and I will betray you and Aeijys will be mine at last. I will have a powerful, worthy mate. Her faith in the Hellgod will shine as brightly as it once did for Aroana. She will be a true paladin of the night.*

\* \* \* \*

Margren sat in the middle of Mephistis' bed, the covers gathered loosely about her, staring out the window as the sun rose.

Mephistis crawled across the bed, wrapping around her. "You enjoyed the orgy?"

Margren nodded.

"Then why are you brooding?"

"I keep thinking about my ma'aram. That last moment. She hated me. I always knew she did. I did not want to face it. Not really. I always wanted to believe that she loved me; I believed with half my heart, that she did. Or would. I tried to explain about Aeijys. How she forced me to do it. But ma'aram would not listen. She put that blade through my heart. Brij's spirit came to me near the end of the orgy, told me she had slain my ma'aram out of love for me. Brij avenged me and died for it. They took her head and heart so she could not return."

"Brij was a fine sa'necari."

"Yes, she was. I miss her."

"If Brij comes again and you enticed her into a soul gem, we could see to her rebirth. We could borrow one of the full-meals for a year to womb her."

"Then we would raise her? Would she remember us?"

"In time."

"I want that. Can we start soon?" Margren's face brightened, then fell.

Mephistis shook his head at the mercurialness of Margren. "What is it now?"

"Our sons. I want our sons. Aejys can't have them."

"I want them too, beloved. Hoon and I have tried to scry them, but gotten nowhere. She has shielded them from us."

"Then get Juldrid and make her tell."

"I promise, we will get Juldrid. That traitor will tell us everything, lead us to the children. Then mortgiefan, slow and sweet."

"And Aejys. I want to force the hilt from my ruined blade through her flesh and bone, bond it to her heart so that she cannot escape my spells and then turn her."

"Beloved, I must have mortgiefan from her. It is the only thing that will heal me. You know how much the deijanrael hurts me. I must have her death. You simply cannot do this."

Margren nodded, twining around him. "I am sure we can satisfy both of us."

## **CHAPTER NINETEEN**

### **MARCHING ORDERS**

"Put her in my bed," Bryndel said as the two myn-at-arms carried Talons in. They pulled back the quilts and top sheet, laying her down in the middle. She stared up at them with drug-glazed eyes, unable to move and only half-aware of what was happening. They roughly shoved her dress up, getting her undressed as if she were a large doll.

"Don't ... do this," she struggled for each word.

"Don't worry, my dearest." Bryndel kissed her forehead. "This is unfortunate, but you have forced us to it. Tomorrow you will not remember any of it." He nodded at

the nearest male who opened his pants and climbed on top of her.

The mon began enthusiastically enough, then his eyes glazed, and he fell away with a small, strangled cry. The second mon rushed over, put two fingers to his companion's neck, and looked up, shaking his head. "He's dead."

"So that much is true. Your turn."

The second mon turned pale. "My lord..."

"You have just helped rape the Grand Master's heir. Now you can die inside her or where you stand."

The mon nodded. He played with himself, trying to get it up and finally managed. His heart hammered and his pulse raced as he pushed into her, trying hard not to think about the fact that he was raping the heir – the heir who had just magically killed a mon. The bi-kyndi did not rise and he did not die. He calmed down and finished with her; but he was shaking hard as he shoved himself off.

"So," Bryndel said, his eyes bright with victory, "my informant was right. The bi-kyndi discharged itself with the first mon in its entirety. The rest of the night is mine." He tossed a pouch of gold to the man. "Get out of here and take the body with you."

Bryndel poured more of the drugged wine into a glass, lifted her head, and forced it down her.

Talons wanted to fight, but could not. *I will remember. I will. I will.*

\* \* \* \*

"I don't think this is such a good idea," Tagalong said, pacing her pony beside the wagon. Tamlestari sat beside the driver. Her stomach hugely swollen with the twins due in less than two months.

Tamlestari glared at Tagalong. "Aejys is alive. I'm not going back and I'm not stopping. Most of these soldiers are mine. You're only nominally in charge. This is my company and nothing is going to hinder me. I am going to be with Aejys. Period. End of story." She slapped the wagon seat for emphasis, just as she had seen Tagalong do with those final words.

Tagalong rolled her eyes and sighed. She hated it when someone handed her back her own sass. "Stupid, puddin' head paladins," she muttered, clicking her tongue at the pony who lurched into a trot. "Get ta Vorgensburg and I'll have two of 'em. Shit!"

The huge van included the surviving members of Aejys' household guard; the

Valdren rangers who had come to Shaurone with Tamlestari; a full company comprised of masterless paladins and soldiers who wanted to sign up under Aeijys' banner led by the survivors of Ladonys' household; a full company of bradae, the fighting priests of Aroana, who intended to found a temple in the new kingdom of Rowanhart; and more than sixty settlers under the leadership of Aeijys' old friend Blackbird, a crippled former knight of Rowanslea.

Birdie had put the word out all over Rowanslea about Aeijys' survival, with the High Priest of Aroana, Sonden, supporting her. The two companies and the settlers then marched to Iarwind castle in the Mar'ajanate of Yarrendar where they told Tagalong and Tamlestari what was happening. The one reassuring thing about the companies was that Sonden and his priests had checked everyone out magically: there would be no Waejontori sleepers and shifters traveling to Vorgensburg and then on to Rowanhart. They had learned some hard lessons during the march to Shaurone; in the aftermath of taking Dragonshead; and in the aborted coup led by Margren and the sa'necari. Aeijys' greatest strength had always been that she was a great leader and general, not that she was a great warrior – she was only average – and she often told people: "I'm just a soldier."

Tagalong and Aeijys had spoken for years about the possibility of Rowanhart; the stout dwarf wondered what had prompted her to finally do it. They had listened in to several of Aeijys' council meetings while they pulled things together for the march, but had not been able to actually see or hear Aeijys – except for the first time when they saw her and Skree shattered the scrying bowl. There was always a blurred spot where Aeijys sat and spoke – Laurelyanne said that she was shielded. Probably by Josh, now calling himself Josiah, and that new triton mage, Skree. Aeijys always attracted the unlikeliest folk. It was one of her virtues. It was what attracted Tagalong to her when they were still children. As Tagalong's pony came alongside Laurelyanne at the head of the van, she was still muttering, "stubbornest, stupidest, damn puddin' head paladins."

"She gave it to you again?" Laurelyanne observed dryly.

Tagalong shot her a sharp, sidewise glance with her eyebrows drawn down. "Yeah."

"The prince is quite a firebrand," she said, with cool detachment, and a small shrug. "I tried to talk her out of this. The babes will probably be born in Vallimrah. That means Magdarien will have to acknowledge them whether she likes the fact that Aeijys is the bloodmother or not."

"Huh! Just keep Magdarien away from me and I'll be happy. Annoys tha hell outta me she don't think Aeijys is good enough fer Tamlestari."

"She wanted a sylvan noble or a fireborn for Tamlestari. That is tradition among the Valdren royalty. They don't marry outside their own kind."

"Tough titty! Tamlestari is more Sharani than Valdren."

"A matter of rearing."

"She could just repudiate tha whole lot of ya."

"No. She could not. Tamlestari is the last of the Havenrains. Unless she produces litters and sends half to Vallimrah in her place, she will still be heir."

"Magdarien would have to drag her kickin' an' screamin' all the way if she wants ta break'em up."

"If she was desperate enough..."

"An' Aejs'd kick her butt. Matter of fact, so would Tamlestari."

Laurelyanne smiled. "Vallimran politics have become interesting again."

Jaqui of Treth trotted down the road toward them.

"What's up, Jaqui?" Tagalong called.

"We've found a fine place to camp. A sheltered meadow. And its no man's land. Gods, I'll be glad to be out of Beltria."

Tagalong nodded. "Me too. Damned one-god fanatics."

The only crossable ford that early in the spring led through the northern edge of Beltria. The one thing that the company had in its favor was that they were too large a group to be casually contested and by the time an army could be gathered to attack, they would be out of there. Although the realms were growing on the Merezian continent, it was still ruled on a strictly what you could realistically defend basis. There were vast areas that cartographers labeled simply "here there be monsters." Eventually they would be rubbing elbows, but not yet.

"How far?"

"An hour's ride. No more."

"Fall back ta tha remounts, then join us up here."

"I hear it," Jaqui grinned.

\* \* \* \*

Aejys went early to the meeting room, just for a chance to be alone and think about what Dree and Josiah had told her. For the first time in years she could stop asking herself whether it was something she did nor did not do that had turned her little

sister against her: Outside forces had done that. She remembered the snow castle and, as she thought about it, realized it had been around that time that Margren started acting strangely toward her. Now she found herself regretting that long ago decision to leave the pouting child behind. She should have gone back for Margren. Maybe she could have prevented that first meeting between Margren and Mephistis. She knew, in her mind, if not her heart, that the feelings were irrelevant, that it was far too late to take back that one act, and that regret and guilt achieved nothing. Yet she could not stop herself from feeling it. She had made so many mistakes in her life and it was so very hard not to brood about them. So hard to stop beating herself with the stick of memory.

"Aejys?" Josiah took his seat beside her. "It isn't your fault. You did not make it happen."

"Reading my mind?"

"No. Just knowing how your head works."

"I may not have made it happen, but I certainly did not prevent it."

"You were only ten years old. There was nothing you could have done."

"Josiah, four people I loved dearly died because I made the wrong choices."

Josiah started to say something else, caught sight of Skree coming through the door, and fell silent.

Skree took his place, leaning forward on his elbows. "The oracle's words to Dree are troubling."

Aejys nodded. "There is a slice of Waejontor we could not take, so we bypassed it. The Valley of Baron Hoon." She glanced at Josiah who unrolled the map he had carried in. "There. That's the valley. It abuts Norendel, that's Carliff's kingdom. There are only two passes into Norendel, one leading into it from Hoon's Valley and the one out of Vallimrah. The pass linking Vallimrah and Norendel is right up against the fireborns' breeding grounds."

"Hoon is not going to let us just dance in there and take that sword," Josiah said.

"I know that," Aejys said. "I also need to know where Margren and Mephistis are before I make any decisions. Skree?"

The triton took a crystal on a silver chain from his pocket. He dangled it over the map, stilling its movement with a finger. "Where is Mephistis?" The crystal swung back and forth for a moment like a pendulum, and then began a circling movement that shrank to a tiny round above Hoon's valley.

Aejys felt her stomach tighten.

Skree stilled the crystal. "Where is Margren?" The crystal began to move, finally hovering again above Hoon's valley.

"We get in there and we get out," Aejys said, gravely. "If we move quickly enough they will never know we were there."

"What will you do about Margren?" Skree asked.

"I will have to find an army, then dig them out." *Maybe this time I'm making the right decisions* . "Fetch the others, Josiah, we're ready for the rest of it."

When Becca, Taun, Omer, and Raim joined them, Aejys explained what she wanted from each of them. Skree and Raim would go to Rowanhart to oversee the building there. The others would remain in Vorgensburg, taking care of business. This year the trading caravans would not go out: Everyone would be needed at home. Omer was in command of the military defense of Vorgensburg, the entire city guards were under his leadership. They would decide what modifications needed to be made to the walls and towers and make them. For the time being Omer was also the armsmaster to the guards as well as their commander. Those who wished to swear fealty and take service with either Vorgensburg or Rowanhart would be funneled first to Skree to have their loyalties and other matters Read, and then sent on to Becca if they passed inspection.

Taun had examined so many children and youths as possible apprentices that he had started finding many odd and interesting talents, most of which he could not use in his own apprentices, who had to all have the gift of Reading, so he planned to send these to Skree. Skree would help them find a place in the new kingdom. To Skree's delight, three of the children had the mage gift and one of them, an eight year old girl, Taun suspected might even be a lifemage when she grew into her powers.

\* \* \* \*

Talons woke in a strange bed with her head aching. There was something she was supposed to remember, but it eluded her. Had she been drinking? She drank liquor and wine in moderation: her last memory was of a toast at the party in Lord Wrathscar's suites. Her awareness felt thick and muzzy, but her stomach was settled just fine – that did not sound like a hangover. She was naked. She turned on her side and found that she was not alone in the bed.

"What is it, my love?" Bryndel asked, wrapping his arms around her.

"What the hell am I doing here?"

"Don't you remember? We came here after the party. I grant you were a little tipsy, but surely you remember what a wonderful time we had. We made love all night.

You told me you loved me." He sounded hurt, like a very vulnerable little boy.

"I don't. I hate you." Her hand dropped to her loins and found a thick, gooey wetness. Her hand came up to her nose and her heart fell. Her loins were thick with half-dried semen. Bryndel was not lying. They must have been doing it all night. "No. This can't be. I don't want you."

"Please, Talons, don't ruin what we meant to each other last night. I love you."

She jumped out of bed, hurried into her clothes, and fled.

Bryndel let her go, settling back into the sheets. A few more times like this and she should start to wonder what she really felt. Especially since Galee had gotten into her mind long enough yesterday to waltz her around telling everyone she loved him. Then it would be time for a servant to catch them in bed together. The Grand Master would be forced to order the wedding post haste.

\* \* \* \*

When Talons reached her rooms, she locked herself in. She ripped the dress off, grabbed a dagger from her bandoleer on the wall, and began slashing it. Strips of cloth flew all around her.

"Dynarien! Dynarien!" She screamed, throwing every ounce of anger and desperation into the call, knowing emotion would amplify it. She had passed several people along the way who told her how glad they had been when she told them it was a love match – yet she could not remember saying any such thing. Worse, there had been enough of them – people she had known for years and trusted – to suggest to her they could not all be lying. *Drunk or not, how could I have done such a thing? How? I feel dirty.*

The scent of roses filled the room.

"What is it?" Dynarien asked, then stared hard at her nakedness, his eyes like saucers and his eyebrows arched nearly to his hairline. His manhood reacted, but he forced it down. The look on her face tore at his heart. He had never seen Talons looking less like herself and more like a trapped animal.

"Tell me I'm not pregnant. Please." She sounded desperate.

Dynarien settled next to her, took her wrist, and Read her. "You're not." He put his hand to his face, forefinger steepled at his temple and his little finger in his teeth. He wanted to hold her, but kept to his promise of no touching. "You want to tell me what happened?"

Talons folded herself into his arms and poured out her misery of the last few weeks. He listened. He had wanted for months to hold her like this, but not under these

circumstances. He pressed his head against hers, his long red-blond hair falling around her like a veil. When she finished, he summoned a basin, pitcher of water and towels from his home.

"Clean yourself up and get dressed." He felt angry, but kept his head. There were rules they both were bound by and they had to work within them. "Get all your weapons and gear together. I'll jump you just outside the doors to the High Temple. Have the Patriarch put you some place safe. Have him send word that you've gone into retreat to pray. No one can argue with that. And Talons, I found fading traces of some kind of drug in your system. By the time anyone else can Read you, those traces will be gone."

"What do you mean 'drug'?" she asked, suspiciously.

"It was not alcohol. You did not simply get drunk and wind up in bed with someone you hate. He wanted you to think you had. He wanted you confused and humiliated. You've been raped."

"Shit! I'll rip his fucking throat out."

"I don't think you'd get away with it. Something is going on here and you're just a means to an end. If he did get you pregnant, you'd have to marry him immediately, wouldn't you?"

"Probably."

"Then he'll keep finding ways to drug you and you'll keep waking up in bed with him until either your grandsire holds the wedding or you conceive. You could use preventatives, but you would still keep waking up in his bed. And if he figured out what you were doing, he could easily leave word you and he had run off together. After a few weeks alone with you... Well you understands what I'm saying. I don't think you want that."

"No. I don't."

"I don't know how he got past the bi-kyndi. I'll have to think about it. I thought you had cousins."

"I did. Five. All male. They're dead. Within the last six months. All accidents as far as anyone knew. I'm not certain any more. But I do know how he got past the bi-kyndi. Galee fetched a blocker for my grandsire."

"I think I can get you out of Creeya for a while on a legitimate errand that your grandsire cannot refuse. But I'll need a few days."

\* \* \* \*

Dynarien dropped Talons off four yards from the temple. The grounds were full of students from the school on the north end of the compound.

"Talons," one of them hailed her. "I really couldn't picture you with Bryndel. Seeing you falling all over him last night in the Music Chamber was – well, I never expected it."

"Betrothed or not," the second one said. "I thought you had better taste."

Talons stiffened. She did not know what to say. She did not remember going to the Music Chamber.

"Talons?" Alora, a rawhide whip of a youth, slender and hard-muscled, came up beside her. Her dark brunette hair hung in a thick braid that brushed her hips. "We need to talk. You, two, get out of here."

The students left, giggling.

"Did I really do that?" Talons asked Alora.

"Yes. I was there for part of it," her voice was controlled, steady, yet with an undercurrent of concern. Her brow furrowed as she asked, "You don't remember?"

"No. I don't."

"You were introducing him to everyone as your 'beloved Bryndel.' You were falling all over him, kissing him like a slut."

"I woke up in his bed this morning. I couldn't remember how I got there."

"Talons! Just the person I was looking for!" A soft voice broke upon them. Gylorean Galee swished up in her long dress. "Your grandsire wishes to speak with you."

Talons sighed inwardly. If she had just ignored everyone she would have gotten into the temple and safety.

"Where is he?"

"I'll show you. Come along."

Talons followed Galee back into the palace, turning into the west wing – the section where her own rooms were. Galee swung a door open and went in. So far as Talons knew this suite was not occupied, but she followed anyway, being used to meeting her grandsire in strange places as well as to obeying Galee as his lieutenant. Galee caught Talons' arm, turning her. As their eyes met, Talons felt herself slide away into nothingness.

Galee caught her as she fell, laid her on the bed, and opened her clothing. "We have many plans for you."

Her mouth opened, her fangs lengthened. Galee nuzzled Talons' breast, finding the vein she wanted and pierced it. Galee preferred the throat, but did not want to leave a mark where it could easily be seen. She loved the taste of consecrated blood. Most vampires could not have taken the mind of a paladin as strong as Talons, especially with Hadjys' mark burned into her flesh. Galee was ancient beyond imagining. In life she had been the get of a demon on a lamia, a serpent woman who fed on children. She retained the lamia's venom in her claws, though she had found other uses for her teeth.

\* \* \* \*

Talons woke in a strange bed in an empty suite with no memory of how she had gotten there or whom she had last spoken to. She felt suddenly cold with fear. For the first time in her life she had encountered an enemy she could not fight – or name. She sat up and was hit by a wave of dizziness. She found blood on her clothing. Her breast hurt. She opened her tunic and looked down at the small wound. She tried to grasp what it meant, but her mind slid away from the implications and she could not think. Talons stood, swaying drunkenly, and then staggered to the door. She did not see anyone in the hallway. She leaned her head and hands on the wall, walking slowly to her rooms just four suites down. She fumbled with the door. It was getting harder to focus, not better as she had hoped. She got the door open and stumbled, falling to her knees.

"Hello, darling."

"Bryndel?"

Hands seized her, slamming her onto her back. Someone forced a glass vial between her teeth, filled her mouth with liquid, and then hit her to make her swallow.

\* \* \* \*

Two days later Aejs and Josiah jumped to Vallimrah with Dree, shimmering into the air beneath the gigantic Oak of Sorrows. Josiah sank to his knees, exhausted, and Aejs knelt beside him, her arms around him.

"Are you all right?" Aejs asked.

Josiah nodded, gasping and forcing air into his lungs. The Jump had hurt, but not as much as when he carried Aejs to Vorgensburg last winter. He reached for the flask of whiskey.

Aejs stopped him. "Do you really need it?"

"No."

"Then don't."

Josiah slid the flask back and took out Taun's medicine instead. He took a long swallow and felt the shaking in his body stop, his breathing ease. Every fiber in his being still craved the whiskey – he had stopped believing that just because he was more present in his mind than in Josh's the alcohol had no pull on him – Josh had stayed drunk for so many years that the craving was firmly lodged in his body, it was not simply a thing of the mind. Josiah resisted it. He stood and Aejs came with him.

Dree rubbed against his legs and jumped onto his shoulder.

Most of the Valdren were out in their gardens, fields, and orchards working. Those few going about the city stopped to watch and remark on the fact that there were only two of them, wondering where the others were, especially their prince. Aejs headed for the only small inn in Green Haven. The Valdren had few visitors. A ranger in brown and green crossed the common, saw them, and approached.

When she came close enough, Aejs recognized Gloriel, Borian Silverwing's sister.

"Where are the others? My brother and our prince?" As Gloriel waited for her answer, her eyes ran along the Aejs' facial scars which had not been there last autumn.

"Shaurone. It's a long story," Aejs told her. "If you would accompany us to the inn, I'm willing to tell you all of it. My mage needs rest."

Gloriel studied Josiah for a moment, his face was familiar, but his bearing was very different from the man who had come through there last fall with Aejs' company.

"Aye. I'll come with you." She peered at Dree. "Who are you, little catkin?"

That surprised Aejs. "You know what she is?"

"Certainly. Knowing what my eyes see is my life."

Aejs inclined her head in polite acknowledgement of the ranger's keen perception. "Gloriel, this is my cousin, Dree."

Aejs acquired a room and sent Josiah up to rest, taking Dree with him, while she remained in the common room with Gloriel. Over a cup of mead, Aejs gave Gloriel the full account.

Gloriel watched Aejs handle the cup, using two hands to accomplish what others

did with one. "That is a grim tale. I am sorry about your hands. So what brings you here? Are you going to Shaurone again?"

"No. We're on our way to Norendel to fetch Dree's children, among other things." *Aroana grant that I have better fortune rescuing them than I did saving Laeoli.*

"Catkin children are sweet and wonderful. But be careful in Norendel. Carliff will not tolerate misbehavior of even the smallest kind in his realm. Otherwise he should give you no trouble. He isn't evil, you know."

"Yes, I know." Aejs thought about Dree's words. The catkin had chosen to remain in the rooms with Josiah while he slept.

"Good. I've spoken with him many times in my wanderings. An honorable king, he is. His undead defend all the living in his realm. Meeting him and his shakes people's misconceptions about the undead."

Aejs raised an askance eyebrow.

Gloriel gave her shoulder a gentle push. "None of that, Aejs! You've made your reputation on understanding the misunderstood."

"I'll grant you that. But I doubt I'll ever be comfortable with the undead."

"Dig deep enough in every tolerant sort and you'll find a bigot someplace."

Aejs winced and shook her head. "I'll try to keep fairness uppermost in my mind when I finally meet Carliff."

"Good mon. Now you wouldn't be looking for a guide, would you? I'm between tasks and quite free until midsummer's eve."

"I would be glad to have you. But there is more you should know before I take you up on it. I'm going after the Spiritdancer. And Margren and Mephitis are in Hoon's Valley."

Gloriel was thoughtful for a moment. "Dangerous. But I'm still offering."

"I'm accepting. We'll need horses, supplies, and enough people to handle trouble if it comes. But not so many as to be conspicuous."

"I can take care of that for you."

Aejs fumbled with her pouch and, after several tries, managed to get some gold coins out. She pushed these across the table to Gloriel. "Will this cover it?"

Gloriel pocketed the coins. "Nicely."

She started to rise, but Aejys caught her arm. The ranger winced slightly, looking down at the twisted fingers, but recovered quickly, smiling in an attempt to cover her faux pas.

Aejys' stomach tightened and she pulled her hand back, hiding both of them in her lap. She did not like looking at them either. "I need to talk to the fireborn, especially Kalestari. Can you take me there?"

"When do you want to go?"

"Tomorrow morning. First light?"

"Be ready. I'll meet you here." Gloriel settled back in her chair, looking for any way, even a lame one, to make up for her reaction. "Do they hurt?"

"Sometimes."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

\* \* \* \*

Lord Wrathscar sat in a large wing chair before the fireplace, staring into the flames sending dancing shadows across the room. Gylorean Galee sat across from him, her legs drawn sensuously into the chair. Bryndel stood before the fireplace.

"The deed was done?" Wrathscar asked him.

"Yes. What they say of the bi-kyndi is true enough. The first mon died, but not the second. I had her for the rest of the night. She woke in my bed, confused. Especially when I told her she had been drunk and come there freely. I have had her twice since then. It is always the same. The first mon dies."

"Did she remember anything?"

"No, father."

"Next time, double the dose," Galee said languidly. "Then the first mon will not die. Enough of this and we will break her. Even Talons Trollbane can be broken. Now get back there before the drug wears off. I don't want her getting free. She's still dangerous."

Bryndel sighed unhappily. He did not want to break Talons, but he was desperately afraid of Galee.

"And when you are the Grand Master, Lord Wrathscar," Gylorean Galee said, "I will be second to none, save you." *And when all the betrayals are done, I will rule Creeya and the Guild. By the time that interfering Hanadi Majios and her accursed shadow hound return there will be nothing for them to salvage.*

\* \* \* \*

Galee found the mon in a tavern near the south wall in the Poor Quarter. It was smoky and ill lit. She smelled him before she saw him, crossing the room to sit at his table.

"I hear you've been talking about the heir," Galee whispered, leaning close to him. "About helping Bryndel rape her."

He looked up, frightened. "No, Galee, I swear."

"Come outside with me. We need to talk."

"Galee, I swear!"

"Come outside," she hissed. "Don't make a scene, I'm warning you. I can kill you here and no one will think anything of it." She touched his chin with one finger, lifting his head, raising his eyes to hers. She snared his mind. "Come along."

His eyes glazed and he followed her out.

Galee leaned against him, stroking his arms. She tasted his fear as her long claws emerged from beneath her primary nails, and she shoved four of them into the artery in his arm, pinioning it with her other hand to make certain she got the full load of her venom into him. He stiffened, his eyes rolling up into his head as he slumped against her. She carried him into an alley and left him there: dead. It would probably have taken only two fingers to kill him, but she had wanted it to happen quickly. She had been born the get of a demon on a lamia. Looking to increase her powers, she had embraced a vampire lord. She retained the little sacks of venom in her fingers and could paralyze or kill depending on how many fingers she used and whether she got the full load off. It was a weapon she used seldom and kept secret even from her allies like Wrathscar. She doubted even the Guild's greatest poison masters would recognize its origins or nature: Lamias were simply too rare.

Vampires, though of diverse species, generally fell into two categories, those called royals, lineages so powerful the sunlight did not bother even their newborns; and those called the lesser bloods, bound by countless limitations, and doomed to walk the night alone. Among the royals, Galee was god.

\* \* \* \*

Aejys 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.

She waited at the pool near the little stone shrine. Last time she had come here it had been with Tamlestari. Tamlestari had wanted to speak with her ma'aram, who had been mortally wounded by Aurean and had a piece of her soul stolen by Mephistis: Kalestari Havenrain had been restored to life by a priest who had thrown her body into a volcano, causing the fireborn blood in her veins to be triggered. She rose as a fireborn. Countless intermarriages had strengthened the fireborn blood in the house of Havenrain. There had been no guarantee that Kalestari carried enough of it to rise. However she could never take human form again so long as Mephistis held that piece of her soul. There were ways to destroy the fireborn utterly – such as fire-bane swords and blades – but mortgiefan was not always one of them. Sometimes it failed if the body reached the restorative fires quickly enough.

One of the giant birds circled in, landed, and then to Aeijys' utter astonishment, the fireborn suddenly dwindled to the size of a large dog.

"How did you do that?"

"I've been consulting mages," Kalestari answered. "I'm learning to manage without my human body – though I miss it. Oryan said you believe there is danger to the fireborn."

"I believe Lord Hoon could be planning a push into Norendel. If they take it, then the breeding grounds are in jeopardy."

"I don't believe that Carliff will fall that easily. Nonetheless I will look into it myself whether the others will or not. Now how fares my daughter and your children?"

"I don't know. We parted at Iarwind Castle. I was captured. I haven't seen her since."

"Is that how your hands got like that?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it. Everything from the beginning."

"Kalestari, please, I'm sick of going back over it."

"If you want my help, then I need to know."

Aeijys settled on the ground and told her. Then she took the amulet from beneath her

shirt. "This is the only thing protecting me from them."

"They could still kill you before you reach it."

"I'll take that chance. Without the sword many more than myself will suffer."

"You were always one to take chances."

"Will you help?"

"Yes. I've seen castle and the fountain. The threat is credible. I'll do what I can."

"Thank you. If there is any way I can repay you, ask it."

"Take good care of my daughter."

\* \* \* \*

Her body would not answer. She could not wake up. She was vaguely aware of noises around her, calling her name as if from a great distance. She worked her fingers across the bed, walking them like mountain climbers, dragging against the covers. She caught the edges of the blankets. Her hand flicked the covers away, grabbed the edge of the bed, and pulled, bringing herself half onto her side. She could not breathe, could not open her eyes. The tilt of her head seemed to put pressure on her throat and chest, making it steadily harder to keep breathing. Her eyes came open but would not focus. She dumped herself onto the floor.

Talons could discern the voices more clearly now: Jysy and Arruth arguing with Bryndel in the hallway. She wanted to cry out, to call to them, but her tongue was thick, her mouth dry, and her throat tight: she could not form words, much less speak them. She dragged herself as far as the threshold between the bedroom and the parlor before collapsing, breathing so hard and fast it seemed her lungs must rupture. She heard two sets of feet leaving and despaired. For the last three days Bryndel had not included the memory drops so that she would know what was happening to her – he dared not do so much longer – they were breaking her on such a deep, fundamental level that it would not matter whether she remembered how she had gotten that way or not.

She heard the key in the lock. Then the door opened. Two people walked in and Talons heard them drop the bar behind them. She could not move, watching their feet through the maze of chair and table legs, feeling the cool tiled floor against her cheek. Sick dread seized her as they turned her onto her back and she saw their faces.

Galee nodded at Bryndel. "Yes, she's still safe to ride, but give her some more, anyway."

Bryndel raised her head and shoulders, shoved the vial into her mouth so far back the edges pressed her throat and forced her to swallow or choke. She swallowed, too weak to do anything else.

"Once her belly swells, we're halfway to the goal. Not being Guild, you can't sit the throne, but you will make a fine regent when the mother loses her mind the day after the wedding." *And dies in the birthing*. Sharani were notoriously fertile, Talons should catch quickly, and Sharani children could be safely delivered up to two months early. Galee knew they had barely a year in which to pull her plot off – the year that Hanadi would be away. Galee turned Talons' arm to find the artery and bit into it as Bryndel mounted her.

\* \* \* \*

The camp was quiet. Everyone was settling in for the night. A guard was posted around the perimeters. Tagalong sat at the central fire with Laurelyanne. A voice shouting happily in the air above them made them look up.

A huge hawk circled, crying, "Found you!" The hawk alighted; its form shimmered, changing. A wind-folk courier stood in its place with a large satchel hanging from its shoulder. The being was male, a light tunic covering its feathered body.

"Messages from Vorgensburg," the courier said, unshouldering the satchel and passing it to Tagalong. "Some are old," he admitted. "Much trouble finding you we have. What a mess. Three tries, each time more to carry. But we deliver! Yes, we do."

Tagalong pulled out ten letters, three of them addressed to Tamlestari in a hand that she did not recognize. She handed those to Laurelyanne.

"Would ya take these ta Stari?"

Laurelyanne nodded. She took the letters and walked off.

"Mess tent's back there," Tagalong told the courier. "Take a feed and a rest till morning. I'll have letters going back."

"Very good! Very good!"

Tagalong opened them all, read just the dates to put them in order, then started to read. The oldest one was from Becca telling them Aejs was alive. The scrawl was childish and some of the words were misspelled, but it gave Tagalong a sense of pride to see that Becca was writing it herself: the woman was fighting for literacy. Tagalong knew by the end of it why Aejs did not write Tamlestari's letters: the paladin's crippled hands could not hold a pen. Josiah had penned the first letter from Aejs to her dictation. That surprised Tagalong because she did not know the sailor could read or write. The writing was sure and finely turned which was even more

surprising. But then, she told herself, Josh had been full of surprises every time he drank. The account of Cedarbird's death and the seizure of his properties by Aeajys gave her a grim satisfaction.

"Hey ya," she called to Clemmerick who was just approaching, "Grab Briarmottë and get him here fast. I got somethin' ta tell 'em."

"Okay, Tag," the ogre replied, doing an about-face and setting off the way he had come. Grymlyken, the pixie captain, rose to peer out of his pocket.

"I wonder how Fezelbaum is doing?" Grymlyken asked. He had never had to leave Fezelbaum in charge for such a long time before. Yet it had seemed very necessary for him to accompany Josh and Clemmerick to help Aeajys. In the battle with the orc army he had helped Clemmerick rescue Tagalong when the orcs had her cornered. He turned invisible with his little cloak and stuck his sword in their feet as a distraction until Clemmerick could lift her into a tree and out of danger. He had spent most of the last few months riding in the ogre's pocket since most of the creatures they went up against were far too large for him to handle. It felt good to be a hero. No pixie had ever – that Grymlyken knew of – been one before. Someday there would be songs sung about his exploits, he was certain: Grymlyken the Pixie Hero.

"We'll know soon," Clemmerick replied.

\* \* \* \*

"What news, Tag?" asked Jaqui, coming up to the fire and squatting with her spear leaning against her shoulder.

"Wait till tha asshole gets here. Then I'll read this part aloud."

Briarmottë arrived looking distinctly uncomfortable, which made Tagalong wonder what Clemmerick had said to him. On the other hand, he had been looking more and more distressed as the weeks wore on, and the tale of her finding him with the talking-stone made the rounds. His reputation had plummeted. Where many had thought him a simple trade spy at first, they were now seriously considering him a traitor. Tagalong was about to finish him off.

Tagalong began to read:

*"In the first week of the third month of winter, we were attacked by a group of myn sent by Cedarbird. They were led by a sa'necari called Dinger."*

"Dinger was sa'necari?" Briarmottë exclaimed.

"Shut up and listen!" She brandished the letter at him and Clemmerick gave him a resounding thump that staggered the young mon.

The little clearing around the fire was filling up with the curious.

"Becca laid him out with a book."

Laughter from those around her who knew Becca made her pause.

Tagalong read on:

*"Josiah led the attack on Cedarbird the next day. Josiah killed Cedarbird and we seized his properties as recompense. Like it or not, I am now Prince Protector of Vorgensburg as well as King of Rowanhart, our new realm."*

"Josiah?" Briarmottë asked.

"That's Josh," said Clemmerick.

Tagalong turned a stern glance on Briarmottë. "Well, whataya think of that?"

"I don't know ... I..." He broke in humiliation and confusion, fleeing back through the tents, laughter following on his heels.

"Take it easy on him, Tag," Jaqui said. "You don't want him to do something stupid." She had been quite infatuated with him early on the march to Shaurone; however, as she set after him she looked anything but.

"What do the rest of them say?" Clemmerick asked and Tagalong handed him all of them except the last one, which she had not finished. Clemmerick caught the troubled expression on Tagalong's face from the corner of his eye and lowered the letters. "What is it?"

"Shit! This letter's a week old. Says Josiah is Jumping himself, Aejs, and her cousin Dree to Vallimrah, and then they're going into Norendel after a relic – a sword called the Spiritdancer – and Dree's kids. Clemmerick, Aejs can't defend herself, her hands are messed up. What's worse, she doesn't have a cousin Dree. Aejs doesn't have any cousins left. They got wiped out in the war. Ya know anythin' bout a sword called Spiritdancer."

"My mother wanted me to be a loremaster."

Tagalong took that to mean 'yes.' "Well, out with it. Why's Aejs doin' a fool thing like this?"

"There are nine swords, forged by Eldarion Havenrain in the last years of the Age of Renewal. He forged a lot of stuff."

"Stick to the subject."

"Well these swords were for the greatest paladins of the Nine. Spiritdancer belongs to Kalirion."

"Then why's Aeijys goin' after it?"

"Well you stop interrupting?"

"Yeah, like he says!" Grymlyken popped over the edge of Clemmerick's pocket.

"Go on."

"It doesn't matter who wields them. There are a certain criteria for drawing the blades, each one different. They've never been all in play at once. If a paladin of another god draws it then they owe the owner a favor."

"So how does that apply to Aeijys."?

"Stop that!" Clemmerick finally started to get annoyed. "One more interruption and I'll stop talking."

"Okay! Okay."

"Spiritdancer re-creates the one who draws it. Its better than healing in that the wielder is far better than they ever were before. If an old man were to draw it, he'd be young again. The catch is to draw Spiritdancer, you must be wounded and in need. Kalirion's the god of healing, after all, and I guess he wants to..."

"Holy fuckin' shit! We've got to catch up with them. They're already in Vallimrah. They're probably already headed into Norendel by now. We gotta stop Aeijys from doin' this. I just got her back. I can't lose her now. Shit! When I catch up ta tha idiot I'm gonna beat tha crap outta her. Get everybody up. We gotta get goin'"

"Tag, we can't rip everybody up and just take off. We've got settlers and families in the van. Forced march would get us inside Vallimrah late tomorrow. We can leave the settlers, families and the wagons at the first village. Take just what we can put on horses. Then travel at speed until we catch up with Aeijys."

"I dunno. I have a very bad feelin' about all of this."

"So do I," Laurelyanne sat down beside them. "I took the liberty of calling a council as soon as Tamlestari told me about Aeijys' plans."

"She told her?"

"Yes. The letter said she did not want to take the chance that the two of you had gone separate ways."

"I'm here," Blackbird said, limping into the circle and lowering herself to the ground beside them. 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. Her voice was as rough as her appearance. The crippled knight spoke for the settlers. She and her halaefs had brought fifteen children with them. Five of those belonged to Blackbird's triad; the others were war orphans she had taken in over the last seven years.

"What is this about?" Borian Silverwing, captain of the Valdren rangers helped Tamlestari to sit next to Clemmerick. He was tall and slender, his long hair a dark auburn with silver streaks. His slanted pine-green eyes, the angle of his cheekbones and his ivory skin reminded Tagalong of Aejys' lost ba'halaef, Brendorn, for they were maternal cousins.

"I told them," Tamlestari said, "that everyone would hear at the same time." The prince of Vallimrah was very round and heavy, moving awkwardly with the nearness of her time. Her green eyes looked tired and worn. The mischief that once teased about the corners of her mouth was conspicuously absent to those who knew her well – banished by grief and the horrors of war.

Soren, a gaunt, gray-haired ha'taren who stopped counting her birthdays when she passed one hundred, joined them last. Her granddaughter, Maranya, a young paladin who had been Tamlestari's year mate and consecrated at the same time as the prince, walked at her elbow beside the taciturn senior bradae, Meenaleigh.

"I saw the courier," Soren said. "So I take it something in those letters is why you called this council?"

"I think Aejys may be in trouble. She's gone into Norendel after a relic called Spiritdancer," Tagalong said. "I want to go after her."

"Count us in," Meenaleigh said.

Soren nodded agreement.

"What are you planning to do with my folks?" Blackbird asked.

"One day's forced march will put us in Vallimrah," Tagalong told them. "Clemmerick suggests we leave you at the first large village until we can come back for you."

"Sounds all right," Blackbird conceded. "I'll look out for whoever stays behind."

Tamlestari sat with her hands folded across her stomach, feeling the twins kicking. "I'll stay with Blackbird. I won't endanger the babies."

"That's the first smart thing I've heard ya say in months," Tagalong replied.

Borian looked relieved. "I and most of my myn will come with you. You'll need scouts. I've been in Norendel."

\* \* \* \*

The Grand Master slept. He did not hear his third-story window open from the outside. Galee slipped in. She knelt by the bed, slid her mind into his, and spoke. "Talons will complain about many things. You will not listen. You will override her in all things. Your god has spoken to you in your dreams. Everything she says against myself, Lord Wrathscar, and Bryndel is a lie. Her fears for herself are all lies, and deceptions. She is in no danger. She is promiscuous, and tries to cover it up."

She opened his shirt and gazed at all the marks she had left on his body over the past months. Good, strong veins were getting hard to find. They tended to collapse after several feedings. She pulled his arm out of the shirt and fastened on the artery near his shoulder. He grew weaker each passing day. Eventually Galee would be forced to space her feedings out more lest she kill him too soon.

\* \* \* \*

Dynarien spent more than a week convincing Hadjys to grant him a special dispensation that would allow him to freely enter and leave even the most sacred precincts of the Dark Judge's temples. Then he Jumped to the High Temple to discuss the issues relating to Talons with Patriarch Eshraf. He had been dismayed to discover that Talons had never arrived, even though he had left her just outside the doors. In fact, no one had seen her in days, including Arruth and Jysy. So he Jumped into her rooms.

He found her nestled under the blankets.

"Talons?" When she did not respond, he shook her. Her head moved limply and her eyes did not open. "Talons!"

Dynarien threw the covers back. She was nude. There were several small wounds to her breasts and inner thighs, which were also caked with drying male juices as if she had been taken repeatedly, and in quick succession. He felt for a pulse and found it. There was a vampire loose in the palace and it had to be an immensely strong one to have taken a marked paladin of Hadjys. He wrapped her in a blanket, lifted her in his arms, and Jumped into the Patriarch's office.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY**

### **STALKING THEIR QUARRY**

Hoon summoned Mephistis, Margren, and Bodramet into his tower room in the late

afternoon. The sunlight played across the finely defined features of the vampire lord, liming the edges with gold. The heavy chair with scrollwork arms looked like a throne in which he sat easily with his long-fingered hands draping the ends.

Bodramet had never been here before, and stared uncertainly at the pentagram in the center. The pegs were in place at the points of the star as if waiting for a sacrifice to be tied to them. He swallowed nervously. Hoon smiled at him, his fangs fully down, and giving him a hungry look that increased Bodramet's unease.

Hoon followed his gaze. "Ah, noticing my pretty, are you? This is where your prince has been holding his rites of mortgiefan. Holes in the pentagram carry the blood into tubes that in turn drain into the basins in my laboratory. It is very efficient. I use it myself for other rites, since the undead cannot take mortgiefan."

"You're planning a rite?" Bodramet asked.

"Yes."

"You've chosen the victim?"

Hoon's smile widened. "Definitely."

Bodramet squirmed.

Hoon chuckled, then turned serious, his attention focusing on Mephistis. "My spies tell me that Aeajys Rowan and Juldrid have entered Norendel in search of the Spiritdancer. Shall we go after them? It would solve your problems with achieving mortgiefan, my prince."

Mephistis reacted visibly, his body straightening as he leaned forward in his chair upon the far side of the pentagram. His eyes glittered. "What about Carliff?"

Hoon made a dismissive gesture. "Carliff and I have been skirmishing for centuries. I am far older and deeper in my powers than the lich king. There are ways to escape his notice – even with an army. I have perfected them."

Margren shared a glance with Bodramet that Hoon pretended not to notice. They were probably wondering what it would do to their private plans if the prince were suddenly healed. But then, that was not going to happen. Hoon intended to heal Mephistis, but not using the body of Aeajystrys Rowan. That body was his.

"I have long wondered if a sa'necari of sufficient ability were to find his seat of power, could Carliff be taken?" Mephistis asked. "Could he and his armies be enslaved? Margren and I have discussed this before. Juldrid, our na'halaef, was the last living blood of his blood, a descendant of his loins."

*And if you took him, I would be forced to introduce you to Anksha all the sooner.*

"Yes. My spies tell me there is a blood fountain in the courtyard of his castle. A fount of power, perhaps? Only the living, such as yourself, can wrest a fount of power from the undead."

"What will it take to get me to the castle?"

"Two things, my prince, a major assault on Norendel to draw Carliff and his forces away from the castle. Then some way to slip you and a small force past Carliff unnoticed. I think that can be managed."

"Good."

"However, the first things that must be done is to stop Aejoystrys Rowan from drawing the sword. Now the sacrifice."

Bodramet drew his power to him as they walked toward him. Hoon gave him a strange smile.

"Did you think we meant to offer you?" Hoon asked. "Not that I would ever hesitate to offer a sa'necari. But we all have other uses for you."

"Why else have me where you never have before?" Bodramet replied, holding to his power.

Hoon laughed to see that the haughty sa'necari was not as brave as he pretended. Bodramet would be easily handled in the future. "No, it is another sa'necari I am offering up. One who offended me."

The vampire went to the door and stuck his head out, calling to his guards. Soon a naked, female sa'necari was brought in. The female's face was bloody and burned from days of torture. Spellcords in puce, ebony and crimson, a standard variety, enclosed each wrist to cut her off from her power.

Bodramet's breath caught in his constricting throat. It was the one who most often shared his bed.

"I felt that you should do the honors, Bodramet," Hoon told him, grinning. He enjoyed Bodramet's reaction, considering that this female had been conspiring with him to betray the prince. The only one, who had Hoon's permission to betray the prince was himself.

The guards tied her down.

Bodramet hesitated.

"Ride her into death," Hoon snarled. "Or I will have the prince do you."

Bodramet obeyed.

\* \* \* \*

"What I want, Timon," Hoon told his son, pacing before the fireplace that could do little to warm him. "What I want is the best you can assemble here. And I want all of your shifters. Especially the lycans."

"So you're really going to challenge Carliff? Not simply a little foray?" Timon asked, drinking a glass of traitor's blood.

"Nothing else will secure me what I want. Aejiystrys Rowan will be mine."

Timon sighed and poured himself another glass. "After all these centuries, you are still obsessed with Mother's blood."

Hoon rounded on him, his eyes blazing with anger. "I never drank from your mother, any more than you did. But I will have the last of the Rowans as my mate."

"She is not the last while her sister still exists."

"That can be remedied. I will have her."

"You are as obsessed with the Rowans as any newborn," Timon argued back. "It does not matter one whit that you did not drain Mother. How many Rowans have you drained? Because the blood calls to you? A hundred or a dozen? What does it matter? You did kill Mother, even if you didn't drink from her."

"And who held her down while I did so? You lurked in the folds of the bed curtains."

Timon's eyes went unfocused as if gazing into the mists of time and memory. "I know, father. I will always remember the way she looked at me..."

"For hell's sake, Timon. She and Waejonan murdered your brothers and sisters. Took them in the rite! They left you impaled, looking out across a field of your murdered kin. Don't talk to me of obsessions, when you have your own."

Timon winced and fell silent for a time. "I hate the sa'necari."

"Most of our people agree with you. We take lives, not souls. Now, am I going to have your cooperation or not?"

"You have it, father."

\* \* \* \*

"Margren, make a choice, damn you." Bodramet cursed, catching her by the elbow and steering her to the couch in his sitting room. "Mephistis or me."

She sat down, smiling maliciously. "And suppose I want neither? Suppose I've chosen someone else?"

"Hoon? It's Hoon you want?"

She made a moue. "I did not say that."

Bodramet snarled. "This isn't a game, Margren. Hoon knew what was between Amelie and me. He tortured her before he forced me to kill her. She probably told him everything."

"And just what would 'everything' be? That you might wish to eat Mephistis? That is well known to all but the prince himself. Hoon doesn't tell him much because of his condition. Mephistis is ill, or can't you see that?"

Bodramet paused, his eyes roving the carpet absently as his memory searched itself. "He is so strong... I had not noticed. But the way he was dragging on the walk here. It had occurred to me. His powers are still strong. Yes. I see it now."

Margren smiled brighter. "Deijanrael. Stolen Death. It's killing him. What would you give me, if I take your side in this?"

"What do you want?"

"Mephistis' death. But you must wait until Hoon heals him."

"Why?"

"Because only that way will you get the fullness of his power. What he has is fraying. Wouldn't you rather have all of it than part of it?"

Bodramet perked up at that. "The Legacy of Waejonan?"

"Of course. And then all the power in Waejontor would be yours. Not even King Baaltrystan could stand before you."

The thought of possessing all that power stirred his imagination and put a fire burning in his blood. "I want it."

"I imagine you do. Necari cannot sit the throne, but once you have the Legacy, I can show you how to take it and we can rule together."

Bodramet kissed her for answer.

\* \* \* \*

Hoon's forces moved swiftly. The principle part of his army included skeleton soldiers with lycan scouts and a mix of sa'necari and Lemyari. They crossed the narrow valley in a week's time and entered Norendel from the south. He took Margren and Mephistis with him, since they would wish to rite Aejys immediately upon capturing her. However, he left Bodramet behind. Hoon did not want that one complicating matters. He left Timon to deal with Bodramet as he saw fit.

\* \* \* \*

Haig refilled the chalices in his sitting room and sat them on the table before joining Bodramet. "You look less than satisfied. I should think you'd be grateful they did not take you along. Carliff is tough and he bitterly resents these intrusions of Hoon's."

"I should be with my prince." Bodramet grasped his glass, staring a moment into the ruby chalice, catching his reflection in the surface.

"I should think you were well quit of him. You dislike him heartily enough."

"Oh, I may be a complaining servant, but I am a loyal one."

"I'm sure." Haig lifted his glass in a toast, adding, "Then here's to your prince, may he return healed."

Bodramet smiled at that. "Yes. May he return healed."

The chalices clinked. They downed the blood blend that Haig favored and the bluff vampire refilled the chalices. Then he hollered for his nibari. They brought another one with them when they entered: the golden haired nibari Bodramet was so fond of finding in his bed.

"You know about her?" Bodramet asked.

"It's hardly a secret. So I thought to include her. She's been leaving your rooms on far too many mornings with your marks on her neck. Don't worry. Nainee would not have offered herself to you if anyone of authority opposed it. You are an honored guest here, as I am."

Nainee knelt beside Bodramet's chair and laid her head in his lap at the proper angle. Bodramet stroked the line of the artery, feeling it pulse beneath his fingers. "There was another I favored..."

"Amelie? Pity, that. I liked her, myself. No one knows why Hoon decided to execute her. Had I known, I might have tried to spirit her off."

"You have no prejudices against sa'necari?"

Haig guffawed at that. "Not all vampires hate your kind, else wise I would not be drinking with you so frequently, or sharing my private stock. I only associate with those I approve of."

Bodramet liked Haig's liquor. It was nothing like anything he had ever drunk before and came frequently for a glass of it. It was rich and full-bodied, putting him at ease after a few glasses. He nuzzled Nainee's neck and drank lightly from there. She settled drowsily at his feet, leaning against him when he finished. He ruffled her hair affectionately. He wished he could take this one with him when he left.

They continued to drink late into the night and by the time that Bodramet, feeling happy and sated, started for his own rooms, he required help from Haig and Nainee to get him upstairs and into bed.

Nainee undressed him, and Haig slipped him between the blankets. The vampire stared down at the drugged necromancer. "You know which questions to ask him, Nainee?"

"Of course, Haig. Have I ever failed you?"

"No. Never." He kissed her forehead.

Bodramet heard them, but when he wakened the next morning he would remember none of it, and Nainee would be curled up naked in his arms waiting for his fangs and cock.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

### **RETREAT INTO DARKNESS**

"Are you certain, child, that you are recovered enough to do this?" The Patriarch in his black robes paced before the fireplace in his study, with a grim expression. Patriarch Eshraf was a large, heavy-boned man who carried himself well. He wore his thick black hair closely cropped and his beard long. His eyes, a warm brown, were sharp and intense beneath his dense brows.

"Yes," Talons replied. She looked pale and worn, but there was an intensely stubborn light in her eyes. Talons had spent a week, hidden away in the temple, pulling herself together under the ministrations of the Patriarch and Dynarien. "Since my grandsire chooses to ignore my safety, I'm probably safer on assignment than here." Her grandsire had privately told her that he believed the wounds to have been self-inflicted, part of a game she was playing – however he did not say exactly what she expected to gain from such a game, preferring to imply much and state little. He

had practically called her a liar and when she still pressed him, he accused her of trying to cover up for a promiscuous lifestyle. That stunned her. Before he had always gone out of his way to be supportive and encouraging. It was as if she did not even know him anymore.

"I am sorry that this is happening. I've spoken to him at length, but he refuses to listen."

"I would rather talk about the assignment."

"So be it. Do you know what happens when the sa'necari or even an ancient vampire manages to turn a paladin?"

Talons shook her head. "No, Holy Father, I don't. But I assume it is something bad. A fallen paladin is a dangerous thing." She was finally starting to feel like herself again for the first time in weeks.

"I'm not taking about fallen from faith, child," he said, "although that always follows if the form the sa'necari have cast them into allows for thought. I am speaking of undeath."

Talons nodded, thankful that she had become a marked paladin of Hadjys; she could not be turned or raised. Since the last long conversation with Dynarien, the specter of undeath had haunted her dreams. She knew about the taint on Aejiystrys Rowan's soul.

"There is a rule, a measurement that says to the fullest extent that one is capable of good they are also capable to an equal degree of evil. Once their bodies are turned, their minds inevitably follow. That is why the elder gods withdraw from those whose souls or bodies carry the taint."

"But what of Carliff? He does no evil."

"Carliff is an exception. That is why the servants of the Hellgod call him 'mad.' His curse was brought upon him as punishment from the elder gods, not the Hellgod. We are not here to discuss Carliff. We are here to discuss Aejiystrys Rowan, beloved of Aroana."

"Yes, Holy One."

"It was brought to Hadjys' attention by a certain divine young rakehell of your acquaintance," the Patriarch allowed himself a small smile as he described Dynarien, "that Aejiystrys Rowan carries the taint and seeks to free herself of it by retrieving the Spiritdancer from Mt. Kaliridonna. Just over a week ago her mage Jumped her and a catkin to Vallimrah; from there they will travel into Norendel. They think that if they move quickly enough, in a small enough number to escape notice, they can reach the sword and return safely. However, her undead sister, the necari Margren, has allied

with Lord Hoon. Hoon has many eyes in Norendel and some in Vallimrah itself. Animals, strange creatures, shifters among them. Hadjys is concerned that Aeijystrys will be recaptured and this time they will complete the rite. It has been foreseen that if this happens, she will rise as one of the most powerful paladins of the night this world has seen since Waejonan."

"What is it you wish me to do?"

"Become her shadow. Your first priority is to prevent her recapture and see to it that she reaches the sword. However, if they should kill her, you must take her head and heart before she can rise." The Patriarch took a gem from his pocket, placing it in Talons' hand, folding her fingers over it. "Should you be forced to destroy her, bring her soul back to me in this. I will see that it reaches Sonden."

"It will be done."

"If you leave before dawn, you should arrive at the west pass into Norendel ahead of her. When you return, do not go to the palace for any reason, but come straight to me."

"What about Jysy and Arruth?"

"They are quite safe. Last night several – I'll not say how many – catkin insinuated themselves into the ranks of the palace cats. Whatever is going on, proof will be discovered. And Hadjys has granted your young rakehell a special dispensation to enter the temple on your behalf. Should he again be forced to bring you here for sanctuary, he will not have to leave you at the doors."

The Patriarch turned away from her, sat down at his desk, and opened a book.

Talons recognized the dismissal and left.

\* \* \* \*

"Talons is gone!" Bryndel's face blazed with fury, his fists clenching and unclenching.

Galee watched him closely from the corners of her sharply slanted-eyes. No wonder Bryndel had never been accepted into the Guild, for all that he was assassin trained: hot heads did not belong in the field. The young mon was a liability. It was a shame that Lord Wrathscar had so many daughters, but only one son; otherwise she could eat him.

"Calm yourself, Bryndel," Lord Wrathscar ordered. "She will be back. Then we will hurry the wedding."

"The Grand Master should not have let her go!"

"His hands were tied. The Patriarch stated that Hadjys' himself had requested this."

"So he says. I think it was all a lie."

"That is neither here nor there," Galee purred. "We cannot move against the Grand Master until after the wedding has secured your succession. Then and only then do we place a seeking-blade in the hands of an innocent. But we can still act to consolidate our power."

\* \* \* \*

Six of them rode into Norendel: Gloriel, Aejys, Josiah, Dree and two other Valdren. The Vallimran side of the pass was clear and open. Aejys could see the mountains rising higher and higher on either side of them. The mid-spring grasses rose about the ankles of their mounts. By evening the trees had thickened into a dense, shadowy forest of oak, elm, and maple with scattered stands of white, papery barked ash and aspens shivering in the cold breeze. Aejys pulled her cloak tighter around her.

There was no road to speak of – it narrowed into a rutted path where the evidence of carts and wagons still remained though none had passed that way in decades; perhaps even centuries.

Norendel no longer traded with anyone. Since the curse fell more than five hundred years before, Norendel had gradually slid into a quiet isolation shattered only by the occasional Waejontori raiders striking from Hoon's valley. Those too had become rare since the Sharani incursion ten years ago had cut Hoon off from the remaining sections of the Waejontori held lands. Shaurone held nearly two thirds of what had once been Waejontor, but had not yet declared them to be part of the realm itself. Aejys believed that would come before long. Perhaps the Saer'ajan would declare a new mar'ajanate or simply cede the conquered lands to the mar'ajanates bordering them: Danae and Aluin.

They camped that night in a water hollow, a depression in the land along a small stream. Gloriel, worried about the possibility of shifters catching their scent, had ridden down the middle of the stream a ways before reaching this spot to camp.

Josiah rarely left Aejys' side; helping her with everything her ruined hands could not manage. He hovered over her like a banty hen and Aejys' obvious dependence troubled Gloriel. The paladin could do very little on her own and, should they get into difficulties, would be a dangerous liability. She had to be protected; and protecting her could easily get someone killed unnecessarily. Gloriel did not want to point this out, although she knew she would be forced to eventually. If they encountered shifters or other of Hoon's tools, the best thing Aejys could do would be to flee. That would be hard on the paladin's pride.

Gloriel ran her fingers through her long, auburn hair and tied it back. "I keep feeling

as if something were watching us, but I never find anything."

"Could it be Carliff?" Aejs asked. She sucked on her pipe as Josiah put a burning twig to it that he had lit from a tiny, shielded fire.

"No. This is Carliff's valley. His eyes are everywhere, but no one ever senses it. Including me."

"Why do they call him mad?" Josiah asked. He carried the Horn of Sephree around his neck. It had been given to Aejs, but they both felt that, with her ruined hands, she would not be able to get it to her lips, much less use it.

"The Waejontori started that. It's because he and his undead refuse to feed on the living. They have an enchantary blood-fount in the courtyard, which they take their sustenance from. It was a gift from his former liege-god when he beseeched her after the curse fell. He did not want the living under his rule to suffer."

"That is an unusual lich," Aejs said, smoking thoughtfully.

"Carliff was a man of honor for most of his life. A single misdeed brought the curse down. And it was one of your ancestors, Aejs, who laid it upon him."

"How did it happen?"

"Hoon's Valley once belonged to a lord of the Rowan lineage," Gloriel explained. "Carliff had sworn a pact to go to their defense. They were attacked by the Waejontori. When it became certain that the Rowan Lord's castle would fall, he sent to Carliff for aid. However, Carliff's wife, whom he loved, was near to term with their first child. A seer told him that if he left her side, she would die in the birthing. So he did not answer. His wife and child survived, but the castle fell. Everyone in it died or was turned. Except for a single priest, the lord's youngest sister. She escaped and reached Carliff's citadel in the north of this valley. She laid the curse. In a single night, everyone in Carliff's household, saving his wife, child, and a few others of true and innocent faith, became undead. The curse will hold until a priest or paladin of the Rowan lineage forgives Carliff."

"I pity him," Aejs said. "If I can release him, I shall."

Gloriel went silent for a time, and then she gave Aejs a long hard look. "If we get into trouble, you must promise me one thing."

"What is it?"

"That you will run and keep on running. If you stay, someone will die trying to protect you. It's better if we catch up with you later."

That hurt Aejs' pride, but of course, she knew Gloriel was right. "I promise."

\* \* \* \*

They followed the stream for half a day, through thickets of large ferns, brush and briars which grew in high brown walls with a flourish of green on top and edges, new growth built up on the old. Gloriel left the stream at noon, taking a game trail southeast. The ground rose subtly, almost unnoticeably until it gave way at last to an open space at the low crest. Gloriel rode out first into the open, pausing with the alertness of a deer scanning for predators. When they started to follow her, she waved them back into the trees, retreating to their side.

"What is it?" Aejys asked.

"I'm not certain," Gloriel replied, "but it looked like a red gryphon. There have never been any reds in this valley. Fireborn don't like them. I'm also seeing small flights of fireborn too often for my comfort. Three and five, flying together. If the fireborn are making sweeps, something bad must be going on. I wish I knew what they were looking at."

\* \* \* \*

On the fourth morning since crossing into Norendel, Gloriel heard the raucous cries of carrion crows. They swept round over a spot not far from where the company rode. Gloriel signaled a halt.

"Stay here."

She dismounted and went ahead on foot. Another one of Norendel's scores of tiny streams bubbled and rushed over the rocks, pouring in little falls through the descending stairs worn by its passage.

A chattering, scolding carpet of crows covered something, picking at it and squabbling over the pieces. Gloriel scattered them. She had hoped it would turn out to be an animal carcass and not a corpse. Her hopes did not prove out. The torn, shattered body lay upon the remains of its clothing. The eyes and most of its face were gone. Gloriel circled cautiously so as not to disturb any clues that might remain to tell her how the person died. She spied prints similar to what a wolf might have left. Dropping to her knees, she measured the prints with her hand. They were too large for a natural wolf and the toes were too long. *Shifters*. That could only mean that Hoon was in the valley. He always sent his shifters in first to scout. Every fiber of the ranger's being cried out to her that the body needed burying; but she dared not linger that long. She had to consider the others, especially Aejys. The shifters could still be in the area somewhere.

"Forgive me," she murmured to the corpse and left. When she got back to her companions, she deflected their questions with a shake of her head. "I found a body. Badly chewed up. There were shifter prints all around it. We'd better get

moving, lest they come back."

\* \* \* \*

They made cold camps for the next two nights. Each evening Gloriel scouted further and further afield, watching for fresh shifter spoor. The third night she did not return.

Josiah squatted beside Aejs. "You should get some sleep. I'm sure she'll be back by morning."

"No. I'm not resting until she returns. Even if it delays us."

Dree sat idly drawing circles on the ground. "I agree. I don't like this one bit."

The wind shifted at dawn and Dree tensed. "There's something out there. I smell them."

Something large hurled from the trees, landed near them, and lay still. Aejs leaped to her feet and reached it first. It was Gloriel – or what was left of her. Aejs touched her throat, finding a thready pulse.

Gloriel opened her eyes, "Hoon is here," she said and died.

Growling began all around them. Josiah reached for the flask in his pocket. Something landed on his back, sending him into the dirt, the flask skidded from his grasp and into the bushes. He twisted, drew his knives, and raked the blades across the throat and face of a shifter-wolf. The creature released him, clutching its throat. Josiah saw six coming out of the darkness and heard still more racing behind them.

"Run!" Josiah yelled. "There's too many!"

Aejs ran. She hated it. She wanted desperately to stand and fight. She cursed her hands and then Margren.

Josiah fled down the path in Aejs' wake, desperate to prevent their getting past him and reaching Aejs. He heard a Valdren scream and die. Reaching for the horn, he found it gone and cursed silently. A huge tree three myn wide rose to his left. He slowed, stepping aside and listening for pursuit. When the howling grew near, Josiah moved suddenly into their path. He spitted the first one as the second skidded into them, knocking the first farther up his blade before he could free it. The blade twisted from his grasp as the full weight of the dead creature settled on it. Josiah drew his sword as he was slammed to his knees by the second creature. He brought the pommel down hard on the shifter's head, stunning it and slashed its throat with his knife. Then he sprang to his feet and ran again. He saw the flash of Aejs' blue tunic; she was getting farther and farther away from him. Josiah slowed to a jog, taking the descent to the river below them cautiously. If someone had to die, he

would rather it was him than Aejs. He had no idea where Dree was.

Each shifter that tried to get past him in pursuit of Aejs died. He would turn and fight, then run again. He caught a flash of movement and something hit him from the side before he could turn. His hand struck a rock, his fingers went numb, and the sword skittered from his grasp. Teeth sank into his arm. He cried out in pain. Another ripped into his leg. They swarmed over him in a sea of fangs. Josiah twisted, kicking and striking with motions made desperate by the sheer press of their numbers as they began to leave bone deep tears in his limbs. As quickly as he freed himself from the grip of one, another would have him – but more frequently it was several. A shifter bit at his stomach, but the corselet held. That shifter sprang onto the middle of him and went for his throat. Before the teeth could find their mark, a tremendous winged beast descended, seized the shifter, and tore its head off, throwing the body into the trees. The other shifters released him and drew back, retreating into the shadows. Josiah lay for a moment, his dark hair falling about his face like a partially obscuring veil; struggling to stay conscious; wondering if the creature had merely saved him to eat him instead. *Gryphon ... red gryphon*. Then the bellyband, saddle-straps, and stirrups registered in his fading awareness. "Guildsmon..." He gasped out as consciousness failed him.

"Sic'em, Little Bit," Talons ordered, dropping to her knees beside Josiah. The gryphon gave a shrill cry and set off in pursuit. She could see his chest rise and fall, so she knew he was alive. "Josiah?" Talons touched him and he roused enough to say her name before sinking back into oblivion, just that and no more.

"Talons."

The assassin set her pack down and started pulling out soft white cloths, and a flask of water. The Horn of Sephree hung around her neck, the leather shortened by make-do mending. She cleaned and bound his wounds, getting nothing further from him than small pain noises. Talons raised a small silver whistle to her lips and blew. Humans could not hear the sound, but the gryphon came crashing through the trees a few minutes later. Little Bit stood twenty-five hands at the shoulder, his body long and golden; wings, shoulders, forelegs, and head covered in bright red feathers with a deep mulberry crest. He lowered his head and rubbed against Talons, crooning affectionately. Talons kissed his cheek, then pushed him away. She stood up, pulling her gear from his back. She wrapped Josiah in her blankets, then settled in the curve of Little Bit's body and slept.

"Talons?"

Josiah's voice woke her as the sun broke over the horizon sending fingers of new gold through the trees. Talons opened her eyes. Josiah was pale, lines of pain etched like canyons in his face; desperation pooling in his eyes.

"The others? Did you see the others?"

"No,' she said, cold and distant; her face utterly without emotion. "There are no others. All I've found is scattered bodies."

Josiah tensed, turning his head away with a sharp intake of breath. "That can't be. I can't be the last ... the only one left."

"I assure you, I have not found a living soul. Just dead ones."

"Aejys? Did you find her?"

"If you mean did I find her body, no."

A tiny hope flared and he asked, "Dree?"

"I don't know what she looks like in catkin form, so I couldn't say if any of those bodies I found were hers. They were all badly mauled. Two of them had no face left."

Josiah fell silent. He had not allowed himself to get to really know any of the Valdren except Gloriel – he had been too busy caring for his crippled lover.

"The shifters that bit you ... were they moonies or choosers?"

"Don't know."

"You need to get these wounds Read. Is there a chance Aejys Rowan could still be alive?"

"Yes. I suspect that Mephistis suffers from deijanrael. There's a mortgiefan link between them. Either he takes her back to the castle to do it or he sets up out here, which would take time. At least a day or two." *Gods, I pray he did not take her to the castle ... I'd never reach her.* Josiah's eyes closed briefly, fighting back the fear that she might already be lost.

"The pass is six days south on horseback. That's a few hours on Little Bit. Even riding double."

"You'll help?"

"That's why I'm here. Hadjys has sent word that she is to be protected at all cost. The whole Guild is on alert. Something's going on. I've seen fireborn sweeping the area. Little Bit and I had to hide from them. That's how I lost track of you."

"Why hide from the fireborn?"

"Did you get a look at Little Bit? He's a red. They only leave the blues alone. They might have attacked first and asked questions later. I could not take that chance."

Josiah nodded.

"You're lucky to be alive," Talons told him. "You're in bad shape. If there were some close place to leave you behind safely, I would." She bundled her gear, securing it to Little Bit's saddle.

"No." Josiah stood. The pain in his legs nearly dropped him and he had to lock his knees to keep from falling.

"You should have waited," Talons admonished him. "Let me help you. Push too hard and you'll make it worse. You could cripple yourself."

Josiah shook his head. "We have to get going. I can't give them time to kill her."

"You must love her."

"More than life itself."

Talons could understand that. It mirrored her feelings for Edouina. An image of Dynarien flashed across her mind. She loved him too. That was the male she wanted, not Bryndel. She remembered all the times Dynarien had tried to talk her out of a simple kiss and then how he had kept to his promise of no touching in spite of finding her naked on two occasions. Then he had just held and comforted her. She allowed herself a tiny smile and muttered, "Silly rakehell."

"What?"

"Thinking aloud." Talons climbed into the saddle, fastened straps around herself, and extended her hand to Josiah. He climbed up behind her.

"Hold onto me," she told him. "We're going to find them."

"Do you have any liquor? I can't access the magic without it."

"No."

\* \* \* \*

Aejys fled heedlessly down the slope. Gloriel had told her the river lay in this direction and was not far. She ran until she felt as if her lungs would burst, plunging through the undergrowth. Screams and howls filled the air behind her. Dree broke suddenly from cover at her feet in cat form.

<Run! Run. Run . > Dree sent.

A stitch caught in her side and she faltered a few steps. She glanced back, hearing a

cry, recognizing Josiah's voice. She saw the battlemage fall, shifters swarming over him. For one brief instant she could not move.

<Run! > Dree's voice came back at her, forcing her from her paralysis of grief.

Aejys ran, tears streaming down her face. She did not know that she fled, not from danger, but from rescue unlooked for. She burst through a thick cluster of tall bushes and onto the riverbank. Dree waited there, but as soon as she saw Aejys she jumped into the river. It was shallow there. Aejys followed her. They kept close to the edge where a dense curtain of trees and brush concealed them as they fled. The water deepened steadily and by midday Dree had moved to ride on Aejys' shoulder. Aejys' pace slowed as she tired.

<Not much farther... a place to hide. >

"Good," Aejys whispered, wishing she could send the way Dree did, dreading the possibility that even a single soft word could alert their pursuers to where they were. The punishing pace she had set and the exhaustion that followed kept her grief at bay. She knew there was no way that Josiah could have survived. Aejys began to suspect that death would not be such a bad thing if she could die on her own terms and not Margren's ... but with her soul unclean, that was not an option – to die only to rise undead, her soul sheathed in cold, rotting flesh, stalking her loved ones...

She remembered an ancient tradition among the paladins of the primitive tribes from which both the Sharani and the Waejontori rose. If their souls became unclean they buried their sword hilt in the ground and threw themselves on the blade. When the undeath came on them, the sword – still lodged in their hearts – destroyed them. She had found a description of it in an obscure book as an adolescent. If she had had a blade and the use of her hands it would have been a better thing to do than fall into Margren's hands again – especially since the intention of Mephistis was to take her in a rite of mortgiefan.

<There! >

Dree jumped onto the bank. A tremendous tree grew at the waters edge, its roots draped over a broad cracked stone, half of them dangling exposed into the water like a knotty curtain. A widening part opened above the water. Dree squeezed in.

<Under the water ... an opening ... it's like a cave in here . >

Aejys took a breath and dove under, hooking her wrists on the largest root to keep the current from sweeping her away. She saw it. Her shoulders were almost too broad to get through. She squirmed and twisted. Her lungs screamed for air. Aejys shoved hard at the riverbed with her feet and then she was through. Her head broke the surface, gasping. Aejys climbed higher, pulling herself into the crack of the stone above the water's reach.

"How did you know this was here?" Aeijys whispered, still afraid to speak aloud.

*<I grew up here. This was my secret place . >*

Aeijys started to ask another question, but exhaustion overwhelmed her and she slept.

\* \* \* \*

Aeijys woke to the smell of fish. Dree had gone fishing while she slept. She now sat cleaning five fish, her claws halfway between hands and paws, using her nails like a blade and throwing the entrails into the water.

*<I know you don't like raw food, but a fire would give us away . >*

"I'm not hungry ... I keep thinking about Josiah."

*<Josiah? >* Dree began eating the fish.

"Didn't you see? He's dead ... I saw it ... they got him."

Dree dropped her fish, making an unhappy noise. *<That's why you stopped? >*

"Yes ... if you hadn't called out again, they would have had me too."

*<You must force a few bites down to keep your strength up. If you don't get the sword, Josiah will have died in vain. >*

"Died in vain. I don't want that. You would have made a good soldier."

*<No. I'm a minstrel. It's the wisdom of the songs. >*

\* \* \* \*

Carliff sat in a huge chair in his upstairs study where he held small councils before a fire that could not warm him. Skin the texture of old leather and the color of ancient parchment stretched tight over his fleshless bones. He stood nearly seven feet tall. Three of his closest advisors sat beside him: two vampires and a lich.

An urgent rapping on the door preceded the entry of a vampire in black and gold surcoat over blackened plate armor.

"Hoon is in Norendel, My Liege," the newcomer said.

"I have not sensed him." The lich king replied.

"We found bodies six days east of Fireborn Pass. Three dead Valdren, a couple of shifters in Hoon's livery, and one we did not recognize. That one wore this," he put a

golden charm in Carliff's bony hand, it was a dragon clutching three rowans.

The lich advisor leaned close to see the object. "Margren. She's come after the children. And her sister, no doubt."

"One of the dead was Gloriel. She'd been torn to pieces."

"Gloriel," the lesser lich said sadly. "She was a fine ranger and a good friend."

"No," Carliff snarled suddenly. "Gloriel was leading Aejistrys Rowan's party. Sound the arm and mount. We're heading for the pass."

The vampire, sitting at Carliff's left hand, asked, "Sire, how has Hoon escaped our notice?"

"I don't know, but we're going to find out. Tell my liches to prepare and open the southwest Gate Arcane."

"At once, Sire." The vampire rose and departed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aejys and Dree followed the river for half a day. The grass and bushes gave way to scattered trees and long patches of weather smoothed stone lying in sliced layers like stacks of plates. They were running out of cover. Dree took the point, darting across the open spaces, going from boulder to boulder to outcropping. Aejys followed. The river widened into shallow wings where it lay half blocked by huge stones.

*<It's time to cross.>* Dree jumped onto a large rock, scrambled across, and sprang to the next.

Aejys followed. Spray, from the water striking stone, misted around them.

The far side was broad agate shelves with no cover at all.

*<Down the shelves and across the meadow. There is forest beyond it. >*

"Sounds like a bad place to be caught in the open."

*<No choice. The mountain you want is on the other side of the forest. Just run full out and pray. We can't go back. They'll catch us. >*

"And there could be more of them down here somewhere waiting for us."

Dree made an unhappy noise, jumping onto Aejys' shoulder again.

Aejys jogged down the shelves toward the meadow, intending to hold back for a

burst across the green. Howling erupted behind her. Aeijys lengthened her stride, praying desperately that there were not more of them ahead, that she and Dree would not soon find themselves bracketed. Her foot touched the meadow. The ground rose slightly to her left and she could not see what was over the small rise. She sprinted for the trees three hundred yards beyond the grassy stretch. She closed the distance quickly. Once among the trees she would have a chance to lose them again. She started to hope only to have her fears realized as a dozen large wolf-like creatures burst out from the forest. Aeijys swerved away from the compromised shelter of the trees without breaking stride, but as fast as she was, she was not fast enough. They coursed her like hounds, running to all sides. A heavy weight crashed into her back, teeth closed on her leg. She staggered and fell. Dree leaped away, fleeing. Aeijys lashed out with her foot, hearing the crunch of shattering bone as the blow connected. She rolled, coming to her feet. Her leg hurt and burned. She got three steps, unable to find her stride again. They pulled her down, tearing at her, clinging to her flesh like ticks. She threw her arms up instinctively to protect her face and the blood, pouring from her arms, got in her eyes, blinding her for a moment. A loud, cruel laugh sounded in her ears as chill fingers touched her temples with a word of command, and she fell away into darkness. By a stroke of mischance she had entered the meadow just four hundred yards from the camp that lay beyond the small rise where she could never have seen it.

\* \* \* \*

Aeijys hung stripped to the waist, her arms fastened to the branches above her and her legs to the trunk. They had positioned her so that she faced Dree – spellcorded to prevent her shape shifting – and three others who must have been villagers, all tied to trees and stripped. They were at the far corner of the camp, which occupied a greensward, mostly in the open. There were several tents nearby. A male hung upside down from a pole, his throat cut, his head tied back, and his blood draining into a large basin. Two ghouls hovered about him, licking his legs in anticipation of being given the remains. The undead moved about on various errands, mostly skeleton warriors. Aeijys counted at least four who were clearly vampires and twice that many necari and sa'necari. She saw Margren and Mephistis talking with a tall, well-built mon in crimson velvet and silk who showed long fangs when he laughed. Aeijys guessed that Mephistis had found a way to shield them from Carliff's notice, otherwise they would not have camped so openly in the lich king's lands.

Despair gathered in her belly. She felt a soul-deep exhaustion spread through her. Josiah was dead. The gambit had failed. No help would come. Her bonds pulled painfully at her wounded arms and shoulders. A gray haze filled her mind and heart, dulling her awareness. All meaning and determination became ghostly wisps of memory. She could not even raise a sheltering anger to sustain her.

Margren, Mephistis, and the vampire in crimson velvet approached her.

The vampire bowed low. "Aeijystrys Rowan, I have longed to meet you. Ten years

ago you routed my forces in a magnificent display of strategy and sheer nerve. I must say you are far less impressive without your armor."

"Hoon," she growled with a fading spark of defiance.

"Yes. I am Lord Hoon." He smiled; he could see in the half-glazed expression that she was near to breaking, if not already broken.

Margren stalked closer, "Enough of this," she growled. Even Hoon was taken with Aejs and that made her furious. Margren intended to put a stop to the way Aejs always lured her supporters and lovers from her. Margren's existence would be better once her sister was gone from it – or so reduced no one would ever want her. No one would want a rotting revenant, not even Hoon.

Aejs watched Margren take a small object from a pouch at her side. Margren glanced surreptitiously at Mephistis to be certain that he had not noticed her take it out. Every time she had brought the subject up he had forbidden her to do this; to use the hilt to force Aejs directly from life into undeath, lest it interfere with his chances of achieving mortgiefan. Margren's eyes slid across to Hoon's with a small smile, and she glanced at her hand. His eyes followed hers and he saw it. Hoon whispered to Mephistis and they moved away together to discuss something else alone.

Margren brandished it in Aejs' face and she could see that it was the empty hilt of the blade that had left her soul unclean. A chill ran through the ha'taren. She did not know what Margren intended to do with it, but she knew it would be bad.

"You are always taking the good things away from me. You have always robbed me."

"You robbed yourself," she answered, her voice soft and worn, almost lifeless in its tone.

"I hate you!"

"I loved you. Our ma'aram loved you. I regret leaving you in the snow castle."

"Shut up!" Margren shoved the hilt, crosspiece up, between Aejs' breasts. The metal seared through her flesh, the bone beneath, and into her heart where it bonded with the organ. A long cry of agony burst from the ha'taren's lips, and she sagged in her bonds, consciousness mercifully fled.

Dree screamed.

Margren whipped around, snarling. "Don't like what you see?" She walked over to Dree. "You're next. Where are my children?"

"I'll never tell you."

"I'll kill and raise you. The undead cannot refuse. You will lead me to them."

"No."

Margren pulled her dagger, ripping Dree's thigh open. Dree screamed. Margren liked the sound, it made her shiver. She slid the blade into Dree's side just above the organs, not wanting her to die too quickly. Dree writhed in anguish. Margren smiled, liking the dance of pain. She dropped her robes, rubbing her naked body up and down Dree's as she shoved the blade in again and again. Margren moaned low, nuzzling Dree's neck, sliding the blade into the fatty tissue of Dree's breasts.

Dree closed her eyes, fixed her thoughts on Dynarien, and willed herself to die. Her soul fled beyond Margren's reach, her corpse sagging in its bonds.

"Nooooo!" Margren shrieked as she felt Dree die before she was ready for her to. She beat and slashed Dree's corpse. Dree's spirit had escaped and she could not be raised.

"That happens frequently with catkin," Hoon said smoothly as he forced the blade from Margren's hand. "Hang her body up and drain it. She should not be a total loss." He signed two vampires who quickly removed the corpse to a draining-pole. "Out of a thousand catkin deaths, I have only captured a single soul. However, I think you will savor the taste of her blood. Catkin blood has a piquant, interesting flavor. I consider it a rare treat."

"I want my children."

Hoon slipped his arm around Margren. "When we find the catkin tribe – and rest assured we will find them – we will find your children."

\* \* \* \*

Dynarien sat beside the scrying pool, eating a handful of grapes and kiwi-fruit. The garden would grow anything he asked it to. He was not scrying; this was simply one of his favorite places to sit in the garden. Once his initial alarm had passed, he had begun to appreciate the golden flowers Kalirion had filled it with as a gift to his sister. The water shimmered, then roiled, and settled. A torn and bloody ghost rose through the water and hovered in front of him. Dynarien dropped his lunch.

"Dree! Who did this?"

*"Margren. They have Aejs. She saw Josiah fall."*

Josiah. Grief rushed through him. Then he remembered that Talons was out there somewhere, and fear for her shoved the grief aside, replacing it with anger and

determination. Talons and Aejs would need him. Dynarien summoned his golden armor, his weapons, and a satchel of medicinals. "Show me where they are."

Dree turned to the pool, waving a pale hand above it. A picture appeared in the surface. Aejs hung unconscious in her bonds. Several shifters worked on a crude bleeding table before her. The scene changed and Josiah clung to Talons' waist to avoid falling from Little Bit's back as they flew. Relief came then, for Josiah was alive.

Dynarien sent the satchel back and switched to a backpack: Josiah would need alcohol. "I can find them. Dree, your human form is dead, but I may be able to bring you back as the calico. Are you willing to spend the rest of your life as a cat?"

"Yes."

"If they mutilate your body too much, I won't be able to bring you back."

*"I understand."*

Dynarien pulled an empty soul gem from his pocket and extended it to her. Dree's ghost touched the crystal and was drawn into it. The sa'necari would not be able to raise her as undead. Her soul was safe. Dynarien tucked the crystal into his pocket.

\* \* \* \*

Talons and Josiah found the large encampment as daylight waned. Josiah looked worse with each passing hour, the pain of his wounds dragging at him. Talons had never fought undead before and, although Josiah assured her that he could and had, she dared not count on him considering how badly he had been hurt. The camp was too large, too heavily manned, and her cloak of shadows would not deceive most forms of the undead. Even Little Bit could not handle this. The horn appeared to be the key. She put it to her lips.

"They'll hear it," Josiah said, putting his hand on hers to stop her.

"Sephree's Horn is only heard by those to whom it speaks," Talons explained. "Kalestari used it at the Battle of Minnoras."

Josiah shook his head. "Why didn't Skree tell us that?"

"He probably didn't know. He's salt water; Sephree was a Fae with naiad blood, fresh water. Most do not fully understand the horn. It's like the whistle I use to call Little Bit."

"You know a lot for an assassin."

Talons gave him a thin smile. "Sephree is counted among my ancestors. We lost

track of it after the horn was loaned to the windmon, Faera during the Great War. It was lost for more than a decade after she perished." She put it to her lips and blew. Josiah did not hear it.

She passed the horn to Josiah. "Your turn. We need all the help we can get."

Josiah blew. This time he heard it. The note was long, high and sweet, yet demanding, a clarion's call. He started to blow it again just to hear it, but Talons stopped him. She took the horn and hung it around her neck.

The scent of roses swept over them and a voice asked, "Talons? What?" Dynarien appeared beside them. His backpack looked heavy, full, but he moved as if its weight was scarcely felt. "Josiah. Thank the Creation, Dree thought you were dead." He reached into his pack, and pulled out a bottle of Dragonsbreath, passing it to Josiah.

"Nearly was. Shifters pulled me down, but Talons got them." Josiah tore the top off, drinking in long sucking drags. Power flared. He silently cast a spell to take away the pain, strengthen his torn limbs, and sustain him. With the spell reinforcing him, he could take a lot more punishment. However, the spell could also exhaust his body into death when it faded if he was not careful. It was one of the most desperate measures a battlemage could take, intended to allow him to make a final stand against insurmountable odds. It was a chance he was willing to take and a price he was willing to pay.

"They have Aeijys and Dree," Talons told him quickly.

"Dree is dead," Dynarien said. "I was on my way here before you blew the horn."

Josiah's mouth twisted with sadness. "Poor Dree. She tried hard."

"Need some help?" A freckled face with huge ears and a leather cap and goggles, strode into the clearing.

"Pieface!" Dynarien exclaimed, grateful to see his sister's little paladin. "There's an undead army down there and they've got some friends of ours."

"Ready when you are. Over and Out." Pieface unhooked a pie pan from his belt and started down the slope toward the camp. "If I get scared, duck and cover."

"We must get down there." Josiah, the bottle shoved into a pocket of his pants, running toward the camp before anyone could stop him.

A tremendous Gate Arcane shimmered into existence on the far side of the camp.

"Carliff has come. He must have heard the call," Dynarien said, then ran after Josiah with Pieface and Talons close behind.

"How do you kill the dead?" Talons shouted.

"Take their heads off. Break them apart. Cut their hearts out. Burn them."

Pieface got there first. Although the humans had longer legs, he picked his up and put them down faster.

"Hey, stupid!" He shouted at a trio of skeletons guarding the perimeter.

They turned and saw him, drew their swords and charged. The pie pan sailed from the Nym's hand. It arced, took two heads off and returned to Pieface's hand, then sailed out again to behead the third.

Josiah shook his head in wonder as Pieface ducked around a tree and disappeared. The mage drew his sword, filling his other hand with blue fire. Six skeletons rushed between the tents, swords and shields ready. Josiah took out four with a small blue fireball. He parried a sword cut, kicked the shield in and rolled fire across the first one as it hit the ground. He dodged around the second and cut its head off before it could turn. He stalked through the camp, firing the tents as he passed. Two sa'necari came upon him. Josiah wrapped power around the nearest one, but the sa'necari broke loose with a word. The necromancer's sword engaged Josiah's, striking high with a snaking twist to the side and down. Josiah blocked with his blade and struck with a lance of flame. The sa'necari screamed as the spell fire took him in the chest and crumpled. Josiah dodged the second's lunging thrust, heard others racing up to his right. He retreated, turning, trying to keep them all in sight. A blade raked his ribs and another caught him in the side. He staggered back, recovered, and slashed a mon's throat. The spell held and he did not go down.

\* \* \* \*

As Talons ducked between the tents something grabbed her legs and she fell hard, kicking instinctively. Her boot connected: she heard bone crunch and came free rolling. She summoned her claws as she gained her feet.

"Sweet meat," the vampire said, grinning at her, exposing impressive fangs.

Talons danced back.

The vampire's power darted into her mind and sent her reeling. Hadjys' mark sprang to life, burning away the intrusion, but the vampire seized her before she could recover. She felt his fangs break the skin on her throat and shoved blindly with her claws. The vampire released her, clutching at his face. Talons ripped his throat out. The vampire dropped to his knees. Talons kicked him in the chest, knocking him the rest of the way down, then stomped his throat to crush and sever the neck bone.

"Hit the dirt!" A high voice shouted behind her. Talons dropped. A pie pan sailed

over her; taking out two skeletons she had not heard approach.

"Come on," Pieface said, "There's more of 'em over that way."

Talons stood. She touched her neck and winced at the blood. It sickened her. She thought of the nameless, faceless vampire that had left the marks on her body; who had been in her mind with such ease. That one had to be powerful indeed. She needed a soldier's weapons. Her claws and techniques did not serve as well in battle as they did in small skirmishes, especially with the undead and the sa'necari. She had trained with the sword and, although it was not her favorite weapon, she decided to start carrying one.

"I need a sword," she muttered.

"I'll getcha one," Pieface said. "I got some good ones in my collection."

"What do you want for it?"

"A big smacharoni right there!" He patted his cheek. "Make Dynarien pure green it will."

Talons bent and kissed him.

A huge grin spread across the Nym's face. He picked up one of the swords from a fallen foe. "Use this in the meantime."

Talons and Pieface walked out into the killing field, past two bodies tied to draining poles. A sa'necari and a nearly nude necari stood near the south edge, watching the fighting which had drawn away most of their forces. They must have sensed them because they turned and looked. The sa'necari brought his hands up, wove a quick spell, and threw it.

"Hit the dirt!" Pieface shouted, flinging himself on the ground.

Talons dropped.

Pieface raised up on his elbows as the spell energy passed above him and launched his pan, but the angle was awkward and it flew crooked.

Margren grabbed Mephistis, blocking the pan with her body as she pushed him down. It caught her in the back and she collapsed.

"Noooo!" Mephistis cried. He rose with her in his arms, levitating rapidly.

"Get them!" Talons shouted.

The pan returned to Pieface's hand. He closed one eye and measured the widening

distance. "Can't. They're moving too fast."

\* \* \* \*

The lich king of Norendel sat a restless steed with a mane of dancing flames and a body of glistening jet. Skeleton warriors, six hundred strong ranged behind him. A trio of vampire lords in black and gold armor sat their steeds beside him.

"They are near," Carliff said, his voice hollow and whistling like wind through a graveyard on a winter's night.

"We are two days east of where we found those bodies," the nearest lord said. "Do you still believe they were from Dree's party, My Liege?"

"Yes," Carliff answered. "I sensed Dree enter Norendel with Aeijstrys Rowan. She is blood of my blood. How could I not know?"

"If we do not find them in time, Hoon will surely kill them both."

"I know."

A horn call echoed across the valley.

"There," Carliff said. He opened a huge gray gate with a word and a wave of his hand, then gave his steed some rein and led them through.

\* \* \* \*

The shifters moved Aeijys from the tree to the bleeding table, lashing her tight. As her head turned, she saw Dree's body hanging upside down from a draining pole, her blood running into a basin from her slit throat. Her heart broke then and her spirit crashed deeper into the darkness of despair. Her eyes dulled and the world seemed to gray over. She heard them talking around her as if from a great distance, none of it registered. If she had any thoughts she could not hear them. She seemed shrouded in emptiness.

"I must have the mortgiefan," Mephistis said, staring down at Aeijys.

Hoon bent over her, stroking her. "The spell of the blade is on her," he said, tapping the embedded hilt. "This must be handled delicately. If you disrupt the spell it could have dire consequences for you, my prince."

"What do you suggest?"

"Leave me alone with her. Let me bring her to the edge, then I will call for you and we will complete it. You will be healed."

"So be it," Mephistis replied, walking across the green to Margren's side. They settled down together.

Hoon smiled. "Open your mind to me and there will be no pain."

"No." Aejs' voice was faint, listless.

Hoon nuzzled her throat, but then he started talking again. "The spell of the blade already pushes you directly from life into undeath."

He cut her hand free and showed her the limb already turning blue. She looked at it and felt nothing.

"You will rise as a revenant, slave to Margren's will. She plans to send you back to devour your loved ones. I can offer you a better choice. If you accept my blood, you will rise as a vampire, possessed of free will, no threat to those you love. What do you say?"

The long nightmare of being turned against her own was close to becoming reality. She held no hope of rescue. There was no one out there to aid her. Free will. The offer was seductive. She would not be forced to feed on her loved ones. She could still have her revenge. Hoon's offer became irresistible. She would take it. Aejs turned her face aside, offering him her throat. "Do it."

Joy lit Hoon's face: Margren was but a poor shadow of her sister. To possess the Lion of Rowanslea had long been his dream – ever since seeing her in battle during the Great War. His head reared back like a snake and struck, driving his fangs into her throat. Aejs gasped sharply and her body tightened, but she did not shame herself by giving voice to her anguish. The gray wall wrapping her dulled her feelings. She could find strength for nothing more than passive resistance. She did not know how long he sucked; it seemed like hours. Hoon opened his shirt, slicing his skin open with a long nail. He lifted her head, pressing her mouth to the wound.

As the blood entered her mouth, Aejs felt a sudden wave of still deeper emptiness – deeper than she believed possible – and total abandonment as the god-given shields that had protected her mind from his intrusion dissolved. She had broken faith with her liege-god and Aroana had deserted her as Hoon's blood slipped down her throat. She was no longer a paladin; she had become a rogue without a god. The blood tasted good, sending a strange warmth through her and with it – hunger. She sucked harder.

Hoon's loins quickened in response to her sucking. It took every ounce of will power to resist climbing on top of her, entering her. When he pulled her loose, he licked his blood from her mouth to erase the evidence of his betrayal. He glanced at the way that Mephistis and Margren had gone, and seeing they were no longer in sight, decided to take his chances. The fullness of his obsession was on him as he opened his pants, climbing on top of her. His expression burned with the fierce joy

of triumph as he pushed past the gates of the body he had lusted for so long. His heart beat rapidly, pumping stolen blood into his continually reviving veins. Aeijys turned her face away, disgusted by the way her body responded to his.

"Open your mind to me," he murmured, nuzzling her breasts, his thrusts going deeper and harder. "Let me take away the pain."

"No." A long breath shuddered through her as she decided she would not make this easier on herself – as if that would mitigate the stain she could already feel in the center of her being, the desolation of sacrificing the last shreds of her honor. She writhed hungrily beneath him, her pelvis lifting in response to his movement. She could not stop herself: her body had turned traitor. Had her ankles not been tied, she would have wrapped her legs around him to pull him deeper.

"You will slide easily into death and when you rise I will teach you how to love."

"No." She wanted him. It made no sense. He represented everything she hated and fought against. Yet her tongue flicked out, running across the wound that had already closed.

"So stubborn." Hoon knew that she was now his, even if she did not. The moment his blood passed her lips, her body had responded to his because of it. In time she would realize that he owned her, body and soul. But by then it would be too late – she would never be free. He opened another vein a little further up, forcing her to reach for it. Her eyes glazed as her tongue found the blood, moaning softly as the forbidden warmth entered her mouth and ran down her throat. The more she drank, the more she wanted.

He sank his fangs into her throat again, higher on the same side, close to the brain stem. She whimpered, tears of shame running down her face. When he brought her to the very edge, he would call Mephistis to take mortgiefan, but that would be the last time anyone but he would ever touch her. The mortgiefan of Aeijys Rowan would not heal Mephistis – Aeijys' soul would not be damaged, Hoon had placed it out of Mephistis' reach – and Margren would get the blame for it. His dead seed erupted inside her. Let Mephistis make what he wanted of that when he slipped his own rod of possession inside her. Hoon no longer cared.

As consciousness slipped away, Aeijys' heart and soul cried out a name into its silence: "Josiah."

Hoon released her, slipping from her body to stand beside her, running his hands over her. She had only minutes left before the change would be completed. It was time to summon the prince. Fire erupted around Hoon and a ball of power struck him, ripping him away from Aeijys. He hit the ground hard rolling, and came to his feet four yards away. A tall mon walked into the light with a longsword in one hand and power in the other: the classic stance of the battlemage. "Abelard!"

"Get away from her, Hoon."

"Too late, Abelard. She's dead. Hours dead. Well past raising. Even if you could find a lifemage."

"You're lying."

"Am I? Look at her."

Josiah glanced in spite of himself. He saw her arms clearly, but her face was turned away from him. Her skin was bluish-gray, clearly several hours dead. "Noooooooo!"

"She's mine. I not only killed her, I turned her."

Hoon heard the sounds of battle on the far side of the camp and knew that Carliff had come. He sprang to Aejys' side, quickly cutting her bonds, bending to gather her up before Josiah could reach him. He had not risked everything in subverting Margren's spell and crossing Mephistis to possess her, only to lose her now to Abelard. In his mind and heart she would always be the woman who had faced him across a battlefield and beaten him; no matter how broken she had become, she could be restored and in a way that would make her completely his.

A surge of power struck Hoon from behind, knocking him loose from Aejys again.

"He's mine."

Dynarien moved warily toward the vampire, the scent of roses wafting across the green. He closed the distance, standing now between Aejys and Hoon. There was no way the vampire could carry her off.

Hoon hissed. *Dynarien*. Abelard by himself would be tough, they had always been closely matched. He dared not linger, lest Dynarien see past this altered form to the truth beneath it. He was not ready to fight that one again. "Hell take you both!" Hoon rose into the night, changing into a bat as he moved, and disappeared rapidly.

\* \* \* \*

"She's been dead for hours..." Josiah said, unable to mask the pain in his voice. The wounds in her body did not look serious enough to have killed her – how did she die?

Dynarien ignored him, taking her wrist and Read her, his expression saddening. "She isn't dead." He lightly touched the embedded hilt and knew exactly what was happening to her and why.

"But the color of her skin."

Dynarien moved her head to the other side. Josiah saw the fang marks and his heart fell. "Hoon. I'll destroy him," Josiah growled.

"She is not exactly dying either, she's changing. That thing is pushing her directly from life into undeath. Even had Hoon not bled her to the edge, she would still be like this. He merely hastened the process. The hilt is doing this. Even if we could tear it from her body, it would take a piece of her heart with it. It would merely complete the process. There is nothing we can do."

Josiah knelt, brushed the long black hair from her face, and kissed her.

"Don't, Josiah. Move away from her, she's dangerous."

Josiah did not move. "What do you mean?"

"Hoon did not lie. There's a vampire's blood in her." Dynarien brushed his fingers through the blood coating her mouth, showing Josiah. "This isn't her blood. She is minutes away from completing the change. She could awaken and turn on you."

"Aejys would not do that."

"She isn't Aejys anymore. Move away. I'm going to end this. You don't want to watch." Dynarien drew his sword. Talons arrived and put the gem in Aejys' mouth.

Dynarien gave her a questioning look.

"Hadjys has requested on behalf of Aroana."

"You're sending her to hell?"

"No. To safety." Then she pulled Josiah away and he did not resist, turning instead into the assassin's arms, burying his face in her shoulder.

Dynarien laid the blade against Aejys' throat, brought it up two-handed and then down with all his strength. Cold, powerful hands closed on Dynarien's arms, arresting the sword's descent an inch from Aejys' neck.

"She still lives," a hollow voice said.

Josiah and Talons turned to stare. The huge lich king towered over the yuwenghau, imprisoning his arms. Carliff was gaunt, dried out skin like old yellowed leather pulled tight over his fleshless bones. He wore a golden crown and armor, a tattered crimson cloak that had once been rich velvet, hung from his shoulders.

"She cannot be helped," Dynarien protested. "She's changing as we speak. I need to do this."

"She is Aeijstrys Rowan?"

"Yes."

"Sheath your sword. I will stop the change."

Dynarien nodded, relaxing his arms. Carliff released him and Dynarien returned the sword to his shoulder.

Carliff knelt, passing his hand over her body with a word of power spoken so softly no one could make it out. A web of black lines appeared over her flesh, radiating from the embedded hilt. Carliff pulled them out, severing them at the hilt with an obsidian blade. As each strand came free, Aeijys' flesh lost the undead hue. The chill of undeath left her and her body grew warm again. "Now you must do your part, Abelard. Cast Shared Life. Give her back the blood she has lost."

Josiah grabbed Aeijys' arm to start the spell and Carliff touched him. Josiah winced at the coldness of Carliff's hands. "She needs stronger blood," the lich said. "Give her Dynarien's. And some from that little fellow. She is the last of the Rowans. Hoon must not have her."

"Me?" Pieface protested. "Why me?"

"Can that be done?" Josiah said.

"Yes. Dynarien, grip her arm. Josiah put your hand over Dynarien's and cast your spell. The lifemages made certain adaptations from your discovery of Shared Life. This is one."

Carliff read Aeijys as the transfer was made, watching the blood bring her back from the edge, watched it dance in her veins with the intensity of Dynarien's power. "Enough. You must not weaken him."

Josiah ended the spell and Dynarien withdrew his hand.

"Now the little one."

"Why me? This is scary. You know what happens when I get scared."

Dynarien stroked his tousled red hair. "Come on, Pieface. It won't hurt."

"Promise?"

"On my honor."

Pieface looked uncertain, but he placed his hand on Aeijys' arm, closing his eyes tightly.

Josiah repeated the spell.

Carliff continued to Read her as the blood passed into her. Some of the Badree Nym's power moved into Aejs with the blood, strengthening her in ways that mortal blood could not have done. "Enough."

Josiah ended the spell.

"Now the Hadeeshyn," Carliff gestured at Talons.

Talons' expressionless, empty face looked at him from her assassin's subtle mask, but inwardly she felt a sliver of startlement that he had recognized her for what she was. She moved to Aejs' side.

Pieface sidled up to Dynarien and whispered, "She kissed me."

"She what?"

"Talons kissed me!" Pieface Winked out as Dynarien made a grab for him.

Carliff read her again. "Her blood levels are still low, but improved. If your blood, Mage, is compatible with hers, give her just a little. More would be good."

"Let us help, Lord," a woman said.

The three rescued villagers approached. Carliff turned to Dynarien. "Read them."

The villagers and Josiah all gave blood through the spell.

"My work will not last. The spell will start to spread through her again," Carliff told them when they finished. "She needs the sword." He lifted her in his arms. "I will take her to the mountain, but she must climb it on her own."

"They'll attack her through the link." Josiah looked about for the amulet, but did not find it.

Carliff nodded. "Then we must move quickly." He Jumped, leaving them alone.

Josiah looked around and saw that Talons was gone also. Without Little Bit, there was no way that Josiah could get to the mountain before Aejs started to climb it.

Undead in Carliff's livery moved about them, taking the heads from their fallen foes so they could not be raised again. The three villagers joined them.

"He should have waited! She needs the amulet. They'll attack through the link, damn it!" Josiah followed Dynarien to a body hanging from a draining pole. At first he did

not recognize her, then he gasped. "Gods! Dree... they got them all. Except me."

Dynarien cut Dree's body free, stretching her on the ground. He knelt beside her and took the soul gem from his pocket placing it in her mouth. Then he lifted her in his arms and stood. Dynarien stopped talking, he rubbed his face over her like a cat chin marking, murmuring words in a language Josiah did not know. Her corpse shimmered, changed. The little calico cat returned, purring in the young godling's arms.

Josiah was startled. "She's alive?"

"Only in cat form," Dynarien told him. "Catkin have not just two forms, but two lives. Like the fireborn. If the body has not been too badly mutilated or deteriorated too much they can be called into the other form. She can never take human form again, but she will live a long time like this. Centuries, barring accident or violence."

<*It isn't your fault, mage.*> The cat spoke into Josiah's mind.

"Dree?"

<*Yes.*>

Josiah reached out and stroked the cat, feeling a little less heartsick. Then he braced Dynarien again. "He should have let us find the amulet first."

"It might not even exist anymore," Dynarien told him. "Carliff could not wait to find this out. It could be a matter of hours before the spell of the blade comes on her again."

"Shit! Those bloody sa'necari are going to hit her again." Josiah's eyes closed briefly, his body swaying with pain and exhaustion. His spell had started to fail at last.

"Yes." Dynarien looked very unhappy. "And should they kill her the change would be instantaneous. A vampire cannot draw the sword. Undead of any kind cannot touch the sword. This is what they have been trying to achieve since Bucharasa, to render her undead. The ultimate eternal torment for a paladin of any stripe. Someone like Aejs makes a very, very powerful undead servant. In some ways Hoon did her a favor. At least as a vampire she would eventually regain her free will after a century or two. Perhaps he thought he could break her before then. She looked close to it when I last saw her."

Josiah wandered away from him, deep in thought, only half-hearing, fighting his body. "If I find the amulet, can you get it to her?" The pain worsened and his stomach clenched with a wave of sour nausea.

"No."

"Can you at least take me there?"

"No. I can't set foot on that mountain. If I even get near it we'll both be in such trouble it would take ten lifetimes to straighten out. I'm yuwenghau. Nothing more. And a very minor one at that. More to the point, most of the Big Nine regard me and my sister as an aggravation."

Dree jumped from his arms and raced off into the trees.

Josiah started after her, but Dynarien stopped him. "Let her go. She knows this valley. She grew up here."

"Will Aejs reach the sword?"

"Are you strong enough to destroy her if she doesn't? She will certainly destroy or turn you if you aren't."

"I – I don't know." Josiah shuddered, his mind filling with the image of a raging vampiric Aejs. His chest and throat tightened painfully. "Is there anything you *can* do?"

"Well, I could get you a horse and point you in the right direction. I can't Jump you there. Another god's temples cannot be entered unless and until the altar is desecrated. Or you get a special dispensation. That entire mountain has been consecrated as a temple. If Kalirion weren't infatuated with my sister, he'd probably rip my head from my shoulders just for moving in that direction. You'd never get there in time to help, though. It's a week's ride at least. I don't advise it."

"Let me be the judge of that."

"No. I recommend you go west, back the way you came."

"I'm not running out on Aejs." His failures hurt. Had he not lost the flask of whiskey in the confusion of that first skirmish they would never have taken Aejs and killed Dree. He thought about her ruined hands that could not hold a weapon. She had depended on him. She had accepted Hoon's blood. There had to be a good reason for that, yet he felt oddly betrayed and guilty at the same time. The color faded from his face and his knees gave.

Dree came running up and curled against him.

Dynarien's eyes widened in shock at seeing Josiah sink to the ground. "You're hurt! Why didn't you say something?" The yuwenghau dropped to the earth beside Josiah, reaching for him. He read the mage quickly. How could he have concealed these wounds? What else was he Reading? "What did you do?"

"Spell..." Josiah sagged against Dynarien. "Spell to ... keep going ... couldn't abandon her."

"I didn't say you were. That's a dangerous spell. I could have gotten her out." Dynarien settled Josiah on the ground, cradling his head and shoulders. "Look about you," Dynarien swept his arm at the scene. "This is a war. Creation! What did you think you were doing?"

"Been in ... wars before ... holds no ... no terrors for me. Had to ... get her out." Josiah's eyes glazed, losing their focus. He breathed in shuddering pulls. The color faded still more from his face, turning pasty with bright fever splotches on his cheeks. His head moved restlessly from side to side.

"Josiah, hold on." Dynarien summoned his backpack and began cleaning and binding Josiah's wounds. He had no idea what to do to help. The yuwenghau knew a little about tending wounds and the medicinal powers of herbs, but Josiah needed a real healer, preferably a mage. "You're in bad shape."

"Find ... me ... a horse. I've ... got to ... reach her." Josiah shivered violently, cold sweat pouring down his face. "I ... I've got ... to help her."

"No. I put you on a horse and those wounds will never close. You'll bleed to death before you ever reach her. That was a dangerous damned spell! You're a fool."

"I love her... Aejs... Aejs." Josiah's eyes closed. His head rolled back against Dynarien's shoulder and he went still.

"Creation! What do I do? If I Jump very far with him, the Jump itself could kill him." Dynarien muttered to himself. Then he remembered Tagalong and her army were already in Norendel. They would have healers and mages with them. Dynarien lifted Josiah easily into his arms and stood. Dree leaped onto his shoulder.

\* \* \* \*

Tagalong and Laurelyanne rode at the head of the column with Soren and Borian. The air shimmered and a mon appeared, carrying another who appeared to be badly wounded. A cat rode on his shoulder. Laurelyanne, riding beside Tagalong, dismounted and approached him. When she got close, she could see the wounded mon's face and, for an instant, did not recognize him without his beard. Then it registered and she turned to the others, shouting "It's Josh! He's hurt."

She regarded Dynarien for a moment, recognizing something about him but uncertain just what it was. "Do I know you?"

"I'm Dynarien," he said. It was a good old-fashioned sylvan name, he could have been anyone. The Jump had hurt Josiah further, though far less than riding would have. Dynarien had originally intended to simply leave him with the company and go.

But they would need someone with strong talents when they went up against Hoon; and Josiah would not be in any shape to help. He decided to stay. "I'm a mage. A friend to Josiah. He needs help."

Laurelyanne could see Josiah shivering with chills. She touched his forehead, felt the fever there. Her Reader's gifts were more attuned to mage energies than to healer's craft, but she could sense the rampant damage. "This is bad."

Tagalong jumped down from her pony and charged up to them, seeing the condition of Josiah sent a sharp worry through her. "Where's Aeijys?"

"Climbing the mountain after the Spiritdancer," Dynarien told her as he relinquished Josiah to a large Sharani.

"How is she?"

"That's hard to say and will take a long explanation."

Laurelyanne looked serious, "The Spiritdancer. Does she know the requirements for drawing that blade?"

Dynarien looked unhappy. "Yes. She meets them. This is starting at the end of the story. I'd rather start at the beginning. This is Dree, Aeijys' cousin. She's catkin."

Tagalong gave him a long glance. "Mighty strange. Ya've got a lot ta explain."

Dynarien handed Dree to Laurelyanne. "It looks like you came to fight." He glanced down the long rows of soldiers and rangers; he could not see the end.

"One thousand Valdren rangers and soldiers, support units, and a sprinkling of obstinate others. They caught up to us yesterday with a little help from the fireborn. A full company of ha'taren and knights, all heavy cavalry. A full company of bradae. We managed ta leave most of the settlers back in Green Hollow. Little village near the mouth of this valley," Tagalong said. "When word got out near tha first thaw that Aeijys was alive, rescued by a mage." She paused to give Dynarien an odd look. "People just started flocking ta tha banner, masterless paladins, soldiers, and settlers. Freeswords'a every description."

"How did they know?" He asked innocently, knowing he could get away with it only because Birdie had been left in Green Hollow.

"Well, seems a priest of Dynanna found out first. When she showed up in mid-winter with the news, Laurelyanne scryed Aeijys. After that we couldn't scry her anymore, but she could sense the mage shield around her. Then we listened ta a few conversations, heard Becca announcing that Aeijys was now the Prince Protector of Vorgensburg and King of a brand new realm called Rowanhart."

\* \* \* \*

Dynarien told Tagalong and the others the rest of the tale. He had covered his shield so that no one could see the blazon, knowing for certain that all of the Valdren would recognize it. Tagalong's eyes kept tracing along his armor as he spoke with an odd intensity. When he finished, she confronted him.

"That's some mighty fine armor fer a mage," she said suspiciously. The armor fit like finely tailored clothing. "Where'd ya get it?"

Dynarien gave her a smile and a nod. "My grandsire's smith."

"What's his name? I know all the best armorers."

"You've never met him."

"Hmnp! I'm an Angtraden. Try me."

Dynarien's expression turned impish and impulsively he told her the truth. "Eldarion Havenrain."

Tagalong felt sorely tempted to call him a liar.

One of the Valdren healers stepped into the command tent and whispered in Laurelyanne's ear. The old mage's face turned worried, she gestured for Dynarien to follow them out.

"Josiah has worsened," Laurelyanne told him, walking quickly toward the back of the camp where the healers' wagons were gathered. "He'll be gone before morning if we cannot figure this out. The wounds are bad, but not like this. There is no sign of infection in his system. Yet he shows all the symptoms. Lord, if there is more that you can tell us about what happened..."

Lord? Had his remark about Eldarion Havenrain given him away? "He used magic to hold his body together long enough to rescue Aejs. I think they call it making a last stand."

The spell had ultimately done more damage than the wounds. It had been created to sustain a battlemage in a situation where he desperately needed to sell his life as dearly as he could: wounds went unfelt and it was possible to bleed to death without realizing it until the moment of final collapse; it exhausted the life force, spending every bit of energy and magic that could be wrung out of the body. Unless a healer intervened in time the spell frequently killed the caster even if his wounds did not.

Laurelyanne gave him a sharp look. "That's battle magic. Advanced battle magic. There is no way he could have learned it in the four months since I last saw him." She climbed into the wagon where Josiah lay. He shivered under the blankets, cold

sweat coating his face, moistening the pillow as it gathered and dripped. "It's dangerous magic. Practically a suicide spell."

"He's Josiah Abelard."

"Sonden told me..." Laurelyanne Read Josiah, her face tightening.

"With all of his knowledge and skills intact. The two incarnations merged two months ago." Dynarien stooped to enter and joined her there.

"Ahhhh. Now it makes sense. I think I can deal with this. At least I know what we're fighting." She spoke to Josiah softly and his restless stirring ceased.

She turned to him. "Now tell me who you really are, Lord. If our people know you, they will not speak. We are a discreet people, as you should know."

Dynarien uncovered his shield, showing her the eagle and blue roses.

Laurelyanne nodded. "Dynarien Willodarusson, as I suspected. Welcome, Lord."

"What's goin' on?" Tagalong poked her head in, saw the shield, and glowered.

Dynarien grinned. He pointed to the maker's mark. Tagalong's eyes widened, recognizing the ancient runes, which she had been forced to memorize as a child. "I thought ya were shittin' me. Still doesn't explain where ya got it!" Tagalong refused to give an inch, glaring at him suspiciously. The only thing in his favor was that the armor fit as if it had been made for him.

"It's his by right," Laurelyanne told her. "This is the Rose Warrior. Now both of you get out of here. I've work to do."

Tagalong's glare lessened as she trotted along beside him. "Yer a yuwenghau. Only thing stupider than a paladin is a yuwenghau. Always lookin' fer trouble."

Dynarien laughed. "My sister is Dynanna. The one who cursed you with all that luck at games so that no one wants to play with you anymore."

Tagalong stopped in her tracks, goggling.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO**

### **SPIRITDANCER**

Aejys woke to herself, lying on a pallet in a small, single room of the bottommost waystation of the sacred mountain, Kaliridonna. She wore woolen trousers and tunic with a bearskin cloak thrown over her as a blanket. A huge figure sat at the table. She

squinted in the mage light hovering about his head. He was a skeletal figure with skin like ancient leather the color of parchment pulled over it. Her instincts cried lich. He turned as she sat up.

She felt her teeth, but found no change in them and felt oddly relieved. "Have I risen?" Aejs asked, feeling the wounds in her throat where Hoon had fed.

"No. You are still living." Carliff rose from the table. His withered, undead face was impossible to read – there was no flesh beneath the skin to twist into expression – but he held himself stiffly, hands balled into fists of rage.

"How?" Aejs asked, watching him uneasily, wondering if he meant to attack her for reasons she did not yet know. What had she done to him? Or not done?

"I pulled the death web out of you," Carliff's voice whistled slightly like a high wind between rocky edges. He brought his fist to his sides, as if fighting his own inner demons to hold himself back from striking her. "It will spread again, but for now you live. Josiah cast Shared Life on you to replace the blood Hoon took."

"Josiah is alive?" Hope pushed back the shadows from her heart and mind.

"Yes. As, after a fashion, is my many times great granddaughter, Dree."

"Then you are Carliff?"

The lich smiled, pulling back his yellow lips to reveal long fangs. "Yes. Called mad because I will not feed upon the living. The living you would now be feeding on had I not intervened." The smile became a snarl of disgust. "I see questions in your mind. Dree lives as a cat, never to be human again. Because she tried to help you – you who are not worth helping. Were you not the last of the Rowans, I would have destroyed you."

Aejs sucked in a sharp breath, wishing she had the comfort of her pipe. "Where are we?"

"We are at the foot of the sacred mountain. You must start climbing now, at once. I let you rest as long as I dared. Hoon will soon discover you were not destroyed. He will sense this as soon as you leave my presence. He will know you are on the mountain. He will speak in your mind, trying to persuade you to lie down and die." He paced back and forth, raging, his words cutting her to the bone.

"I won't listen to him." Aejs turned her head away and down, remembering the taste of Hoon's blood, and shivering.

"Mephistis will try to finish you through the link. Should either manage this you will become a vampire. The change will come too swiftly to stop a second time. I do not know what Hoon told you – your mind is a jumble of images – but it takes centuries

for a vampire to learn to control their blood lust. You would kill those you loved most first, mistaking appetite for love. That is the way of it. Furthermore, you have dishonored yourself by accepting his blood. You are no longer a paladin. You have fallen from grace with your liege-god, as I did mine."

"But, I..."

"No!" Carliff cut her off. "Words are valueless. You willingly made yourself a tool of Hoon. If there were not so much riding on the chance of your reaching the sword I would have destroyed you myself. You would have risen as a paladin of the night. You are filthy and disgusting. You have spent eight years lying to yourself and all the others. NO. Fifteen years. I looked into your heart and your mind while you lay there. You saw the evil in your sister, you knew the harm she would do."

Aejys bowed her head in shame. "I suspected, but I..."

"You knew!"

"Yes... yes, I knew." *Ever since that day on the High Meadows, I knew.*

"Yet you let a man's tears and empty threats turn you from the path of righteousness when you made that vow. You betrayed all that you stood for when you made it. You betrayed your family, left them to die because you would not stand in opposition to the evil in your midst. The lifemages are all but extinguished because of your weakness. Their deaths are on your head. A thousand deaths are on your head. You are a traitor and a coward. I would rather that me and mine spent eternity in torment as we are, than that a single innocent should die. Can that be said of you? You do not deserve the chance the Dancer offers."

Aejys dropped her eyes, her face burning. Her stomach knotted and her throat tightened. She wanted to protest, but knew that he was right. She could do nothing save listen to the lich's rant.

"Tagalong Smith has entered Norendel, riding to your aid with a small army. They will all perish."

"By your hand?" Aejys retorted hotly, roused by their names from the paralysis of shame.

"Never. Hoon comes to claim you as his bride. His forces will overwhelm them. You will have brought it on them yourself."

"And where will you be?" Aejys demanded, wanting desperately to turn his words back on him and knowing that she could not.

"Trying to prevent Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan from taking my seat of power and forcing me and mine into his service. When my seat of power falls, Norendel

falls with it. Then they will wheel and destroy the fireborn. The dragons will return and all the realms will fall before them. And it will all be because of you. Because of that one moment of weakness and betrayal."

Aejys stood and faced him, wondering if there could possibly be any thing at all she could say to redeem herself, yet knowing that words were empty and it was far too late to speak them. It was fifteen years too late and Carliff was right.

"The sword. You must get it. Only then can you have the means and hope of regaining both your life and your honor. The undead cannot touch the blade."

Aejys fumbled with the bearskin cloak. Carliff rose and fastened it around her neck. She winced away from him as he touched her.

"I have given you as much help as I can. But you must now move quickly."

"What do you want?"

"You already know that. Forgiveness for my sins of five hundred years past."

"You have that."

"No. Only a paladin or a priest of your lineage can release me with their forgiveness. You are neither. There is another thing you must know. In this valley, in my seat of power, lays a thing that allows those undead – those such as vampires who would be hindered or damaged by the sun – who enter here to move freely in the daylight, both friend and foe. If that power could be extended by the sa'necari, they could put this world into eternal night. Daylight here will not protect you. Now go. Perhaps you may yet steal victory from the teeth of defeat. I must see to the defenses of my valley." Carliff vanished.

Aejys nodded and went out. The morning light made her flinch. She looked up at the mountain and began to walk.

\* \* \* \*

Carliff emerged from the shadows beneath a small stand of trees, watching her ascend the mountain. "My apologies, Aejustrys Rowan," he murmured too low for her to hear. "While my words were true, they were also harsh, but you strike me as one who learns more from pain than from kindness. As I did." Then he descended to the Gate Arcane at the mountain's base, activated it with a word and stepped through it.

\* \* \* \*

The mountain was thick with fragrant trees, flowering in golden blossoms. Here and there among them were mountain ash and laurel as well as aspen. The path rose

steadily in an easy ascent. The path itself was not an obstacle. It welcomed. By noon the place had warmed. Aeijys fumbled with the strings and dropped the cloak on the path, leaving it. Her body ached. She had pushed herself to her limits trying to outrun the shifters and a deep soreness lingered. Added to her wounds, it made movement hard at first. She was already healing with surprising speed, although she had not noticed it. Carliff knew far more about Josiah's spell of Shared Life than the mage master himself. Josiah was not a Reader; Carliff was. She had gained some of Dynarien's and Pieface's magical and physical gifts with the blood transfusion through the spell in a bonding that went as deep as the genes and cells themselves.

She thought about Carliff's words, running them through her mind again and again. She knew nothing, really, about vampires beyond how to hunt and kill them. Carliff had nothing to gain by lying about newborn vampires seeking out those they loved and killing them. If that was, indeed, the nature of their hunger, then by taking Hoon's blood she had doubly betrayed them. Hoon had nothing to lose by lying to her and everything to gain. No. He had not lied, so much as misled. He had promised her free will, not self-control. She had assumed the rest. She felt filled with shame and guilt. What would be the price of redemption? If she could even win it?

Aeijys remembered Tamlestari's grief at Cassana's death and her imagination doubled it as she pictured her beloved weeping over the dead bodies of their children, knowing their ma'aram had killed them. She shuddered. Maybe it was not wise to try and walk in another's shoes. She had accepted her ma'aram's pain as her own in that confrontation that led to her making that vow. If somehow she could have stepped outside it, found her center and held there against Kaethreyn's tears.

"The road to damnation is cobbled with good intentions."

She heard the bubbling rush of a stream and turned from the road onto the side. Aeijys pushed aside the bushes and flowering shrubs. The stream ran right beside the road there and a drinking cup lay beside it. Kneeling, she considered the cup. It seemed an incredible thing that just as her thirst was becoming unbearable she should not only find a stream, but a cup. She regarded them suspiciously, remembering how Laurelyanne had spelled her glass and put her to sleep when her grief over the loss of Ladonys and Laeoli had been unbearable. She scooped water in her twisted hands and drank, watching the cup from the corner of her eye. She splashed water on her face. It felt good. Then she caught the sound of large wings, larger than any bird, yet when she looked she saw nothing.

There were supposed to be guardians on the mountain. Had she just heard one of them? She hurried back to the road and continued to walk. By late afternoon she could see the top and began to wonder about Carliff's warnings.

*<My sweet, my dear one, there is no need to walk so fast or so long . >*

The voice whispered in her ear, and she faltered a few steps, looking about her in

confusion, but there was no one there. A chill swept over her. She picked up her pace. An itch crawled up her throat and down her tongue as she remembered the wondrous taste of Hoon's blood; the strange mix of anguish and ecstasy as his fangs broke the skin on her throat. Her twisted fingers brushed the twin wounds on her neck.

*< Slow down. Please, wait for me. I'm coming, my dear, my sweet. >*

"No!" Aejs covered her ears, scarcely noticing that she walked slower and slower. Her heart raced, her loins grew wet, and she shivered at the thought of his touch. She hated him – hated and yet wanted.

*< Let me show you the path of true faith. You liege-god has deserted you. Mine will not. Wait for me. >*

"Hoon! You bastard!" *Bastard ... Bastard ... bastard* . She shivered. Her shivers worsened into violent trembling. She wanted him. Her nipples grew sensitive, tingling with need. Her loins ached for him. She could hardly breathe.

*< Such harsh words for one you love. You love me. You know you do. You cannot but love me. My blood has passed your lips. >*

"Get out of my mind! Damn you!" Aejs stumbled and fell, curling for a moment on the ground. It felt so good to be sitting. She had to wait for someone. Someone she loved was coming for her. They would sit together and laugh about old times, looking forward to better times. They would feed and drink and then lie together in the sweet grasses beneath a full moon. His blood would run down her throat while hers filled his mouth. Death had such a sweet taste. "Josiah. Tamlestari."

As if their names were a talisman, she broke loose from the dream and sprang to her feet, chanting their names as she began to jog. "Josiah. Josiah. Josiah. Tamlestari. Estari. Estari. Loyal heart, forgive me."

*< Forget them. You are mine! Mine! I am the one you love. My blood passed your lips. You belong to me! >*

"No. They are my loves. Not you! Never you! If I rose tomorrow it would be to rip your throat out, your head off, and eat your heart." Even as she said it she knew it was a lie. She wanted him.

She felt Hoon's rage like a blow to the stomach and she staggered, falling to her knees. She leaped up, breaking into a run, going full out.

*< I will kill them both and you will watch them die. You will drink their blood with me. >*

"I will throw myself into the fires of Mt. Queleyus before I will ever be like you."

*Oh, Gods! Gods, help me. I want him. I want him so much.*

She guessed that she was now only three hundred yards from the top, about the length of a practice field. She would make it.

\* \* \* \*

Hoon sat on the crimson velvet couch in the tower room where he held his private rites. His face was deep in concentration as he exercised his innate ability as a vampire to speak into the minds of those whose blood he had tasted or had tasted his. It was an extension of his gift for fascination. All vampires had it, it was how they subdued their prey long enough to get their fangs into them.

Mephistis knelt on the floor, tightening the ropes that held his newest prize: a captured ha'taren from the occupied zone. He had tired of listening to her attempts to call down her liege-god's wrath upon him and cut her tongue out. He judged her to be very near to Aejs' innermost nature, someone who would strengthen the connection. He shoved the blade first into her groin, giving it a ripping twist inside her. She screamed, struggling against her bonds as she writhed in agony. Blood pooled between her thighs. Mephistis put his hand in the blood, and then licked it off his fingers. Ha'taren blood had fire and potency; he wondered why he had not been taking it all along. He opened his pants, lifting himself out. He painted his member with the blood and licked his fingers again. Then he entered her bleeding womanhood. *So good, so good*, he sighed, moving rhythmically as he lowered his body onto hers. He stroked her right side with the baneblade, the heat of anticipation flooding him. He could feel the pain and terror in her like a tangible thing. It was delicious. Then he shoved the blade in between the lowest rib pair. It was so sharp that entering her body was like parting warm butter. *Oh, yes. Oh, yes.* He shoved it in again and again, once between each set of ribs and if she still lived when he finished he would start on the left side.

\* \* \* \*

Aejs screamed in anguish, falling to her knees and doubling over. Blood erupted from her groin and quickly soaked her pants. She could feel him moving inside her, feel the pressure of his body against hers. "No!" She glanced up at the sword. Less than fifty yards separated her from it. She staggered to her feet, stumbling forward.

"No. I do not yield." She began to grit it out between her teeth in a strained chant of sheer will. "I do not surrender. I do not yield."

She could feel his rage at the strength with which she fought him through the cord of dark magic connecting them. She got only a few yards further when she felt the blade in her side again. Aejs fell, writhing and clutching at the wound. "No. I. Do. Not. Yield."

She dragged herself up again to her knees.

"Shit!" Talons broke from cover. She slipped an arm around the paladin, drew Aejs' arm over her neck and rose with her, supporting her.

"Tal – Talons..." Aejs gasped.

They made it another ten yards before a winged mon alit before them.

"Stop," he said, standing with feet spread and firmly planted. He carried a sword at his shoulder and wore a gleaming silver breastplate over blue washed mail and beneath that a long knee length robe of gleaming midnight blue silk. "You cannot help her. She must make it on her own."

Talons' face went blank and expressionless, her eyes cold, calculating quickly the best way to take him out if he got difficult. "Get out of my way," she said quietly, without inflection or emotion.

"It is the rules." He spoke simply as if stating a bald truth, but a small frown slipped into his brows and eyes as if he saw the assassin's lethality and was not certain what to do about it.

"Fuck the rules," the curse was all the more chilling for its emotionless delivery. "She's under attack."

"What?" He looked confused. "That's not possible. This mountain is shielded."

Then Aejs screamed as the baneblade found the paladin's lung and through the connection her own. Blood ran from the corners of her mouth. She sagged against Talons.

The Jesmyrran flinched, his widening eyes betraying a mix of incredulity and horror as he watched the wound appear in the ha'taren's body.

Inspiration struck Talons. "Your childhood name? What is it?"

The Jesmyrran looked startled. "Jumpfree. I'm Jumpfree." As he said it, Jumpfree saw the tiny question mark scar on Talons' neck where Dynanna had marked her that day in Birdie's tower room. "Her mark! You have the mother's mark!"

"Yes. Help us, Jumpfree."

The name quickened both a smile and a fire in his expression. He sketched the Kalirioni rune. Instantly the long tendril of dark magic connecting Aejs to Mephistis became visible. He shook his head in disbelief. "This is not possible... In four millennia no one has ever broken through our shields..."

"Can you cut this thing?" She indicated the tendril with her head.

"No. I don't even understand it... I've..."

"Heads up," Talons interrupted his hesitant speech. "This whole mountain is under siege." Talons nodded her head to his right.

He looked and gasped at the sight of a legion of *vargeis*, given substance by Margren's magic, racing across the sky toward the mountain. "Get her to the sword quickly. Skelevrathammon can protect you both. I must summon the others." He rose into the air, setting a horn to his lips and blowing an alarm never heard before on the mountain.

Talons grunted, that was fine with her, she was an assassin not a soldier and therefore not eager to find herself in the middle of a battlefield again. She picked up the pace. "Come on, Aeijys. You can't die on me now, mon. We're too close."

"Hurts ... to ... breathe," she gasped, bending her head forward away from her body, coughing up blood. Talons dragged her on, knowing that every second counted and they had had very few of them to begin with. Then Aeijys cried out again. Talons cursed: the bastard had started on her left side; it would only be moments before he reached her heart and it was all over. Then they stood before the sword.

\* \* \* \*

Two myn lay dead, mortgiefan taken from both, and Mephistis started on his third, cursing Aeijystrys Rowan for being so hard to kill. He could not understand what could be preventing most of the wounds from recreating themselves in her flesh. "Hell damn you, bitch. Fall down and die! Die! You'll not get the sword." He entered the mon, savoring the taste of her terror as he stroked the blade up and down her left side to the rhythm of his thrusts. He slipped it in, drinking her pain as she convulsed beneath him. It was so good. So very good. He rode her enthusiastically now, feeling death coming, ecstasy building in his loins, burning with intensity in every fiber of his body and nerves. He shoved the blade in more fiercely, giving it a hard twist and a rip to the side. "Third time is a charm. Now, Aeijystrys, I give you a wound you cannot resist." He deftly put the blade in the woman's heart as his seed erupted into her dead body.

\* \* \* \*

Aeijys wrapped her arms around the hilt and pulled. The sword hummed and came free about a foot. She pulled again, and then nearly let go as blood erupted between her next ribs.

"Now! Now, now, now." Talons yelled.

Aeijys yanked and staggered back, bringing the sword free wrapped in her arms. In

the next instant two things happened at once: The baneblade found her heart and the sword erupted in blue flame as the two magics collided. Aeajys fell without a sound, rolling onto her side, still holding the sword. Blue flames danced over her body, the sword shrieking angrily.

The keening cry of the sword grew intense, piercing Talons' head like a blade. She covered her ears tightly, balling up as she sank heavily to her knees. It echoed the hurt of her failure. All the strength drained out of her. She had failed with Aeajys just as she had with Wilstryne. "I take lives, I don't save them."

The sword's note changed, the keening lessened, softened into a song of comfort and warmth. Talons' dropped her hands. She looked up. The blue light still played across Aeajys' body. Talons wondered why it had not gone out.

A gigantic feathered form emerged from the lake, shaking itself off. Talons gaped. The creature was easily three times the size of Little Bit, if not more. "I guess this is a good day to die," she muttered, summoning her claws. "And I would rather die, here, now, and with honor than find myself again in Bryndel's bed."

"Have no fear! Skelevrathammon is here! I'll protect you."

Talons stared at him, confused by both his words and his appearance. "What are you?"

"I am a quetzalcoatly."

Talons shook her head.

"I'm a feathered serpent."

Talons still looked blank.

"I'm a dragon with feathers, damn it!" He sounded irritated and more than a little frustrated with the ignorance of the Guildsmon. "I am a companion of the sword. I will protect you both," he said, nodding at Aeajys' body.

"There's only me to protect. She's dead."

"Are you sure?" he asked quizzically. "I don't think so."

Talons blinked and stared. Aeajys' clothing had burned away, exposing her wounds and the hilt of the Blade of Nine Souls bonded into her flesh, bone, and heart. But – Talons shook her head, trying to clear her eyes – there was no heart wound. In fact, now there were no wounds on the left side at all. "What in Haejys' Hells?" She had not expected this at all: The wounds did not heal; they just disappeared as if they had never been there at all. She had expected it to be like a lifemage's spells, to watch the flesh and bone knit and heal.

"It is always like that," Skelevrathammon told her. "Spiritdancer does not heal, it re-creates. That is so fascinating. It is why I became a companion of the sword soon after Eldarion forged it."

"Who are you again?" Talons asked.

"Skelevrathammon. Skelly to my friends. If you are friend to the new wielder, then you are my friend too."

"Well met, Skelly." Talons dismissed her claws. "I am called Talons Trollbane, granddaughter to the Old Man of the Mountains. Hadjys has taken an interest in this one."

"He has nine hells, but he opposes the Hellgod," Skelly said with the tone of one was testing his knowledge or memory. "He is a god of just punishment, is he not?"

"He is." Talons wondered for a moment if there might be some way to persuade this dragon to carry off Bryndel and eat him.

"Who is the new wielder?"

"Aejystrys Rowan, the Lion of Rowanslea."

"Ah," the dragon purred. "So it comes full circle, does it? The Rowans are the ones who outcasted the last wielder, cursed him for his misdeeds, causing the dancer to desert him."

"Get off the mountain!" A mon's voice shouted down at them. They looked up to see a Jesmyrran hovering above them in full armor.

"What is wrong, Briarsharp?" Skelly asked.

"We can't hold it. Look down!"

They did and Talons gasped. Skeleton warriors swarmed up toward them. Their numbers were beyond count. Hoon had unleashed his army.

"Treetop is evacuating the mountain. You don't want to be caught in the spell. Firefinder's going to blow it." Then Briarsharp flew off.

"What's she talking about?"

"This mountain is a dormant volcano. Most think it's extinct. But if there's any fire left, Firefinder can find it. Wrap the wielder up in something quick so I can carry her."

Talons shed her cloak, wrapping it around Aejs and the sword. She whistled for Little Bit who came and she mounted, taking to the sky. Skelly followed with Aejs. They hovered for a moment.

"Which way?"

"Follow me! Hi Ho Skelly, away!"

Talons followed the dragon west. Behind them came a sudden whoosh of strong wind. Talons glanced back: every living thing on the mountain, from the largest bear to the smallest insect, were airborne on an enchantary-wind blowing north.

"Treetop's evacuation." Skelly said. "Come on! Let's get out of here." The dragon set a strong pace with Little Bit struggling to keep up.

Now Talons could see the mountain start to shake and churn. A crack opened in the side and the water began to first trickle and then to rush. With a shattering whistle the remaining water flashed into steam exploding from the cone. Talons watched the altar tremble and then keel over, falling into the depths. An explosion blasted debris into the air and Talons flinched, bending low over Little Bit's neck. Black clouds of ash and sour smelling gas mushroomed behind them.

"He found it!" Skelly roared, spun around and grabbed the struggling gryphon by the harness and rushed away, racing the hail of debris and the cloud of gas and ash. It stank of rotten eggs. They were swiftly flying faster than Little Bit had ever traveled. As soon as they broke into clear air, Skelly released Little Bit. The gryphon dived and then steadied, rising quickly and followed in the quetzalcoatls' wake.

They flew for hours.

"There!" Skelly's wedge-shaped head nodded down. Talons saw a long line of warriors, several banners flapping in the wind, one of them was a triad of rowan trees encircled by an ouroboros: Aejs' old banner.

They descended rapidly. Talons jumped off, running towards them. "Take cover! Take cover! Volcano!"

A Jesmyrran flew down, landing near the mages who were throwing up shields. He turned to Talons and Tagalong. "Firefinder's trying to control it, keep the flow heading into the pass. If he can't, that's why I'm here." He extended his hand to Tagalong. The bewildered dwarf took it and shook. "I'm Jumpfree," he said, freely giving his childhood name rather than his formal one.

"I'm Tagalong Smith. There are nearly three thousand of us and more coming. I don't see how you can get us out."

"Only a few thousand? No sweat!"

"We're here to fight the Waejontori."

"Good! Carliff's going to need all the help he can get," Jumpfree said.

"Where's Aeijys?"

"Over there with Skelly."

Tagalong frowned, saw the cloak wrapped bundle. "Is she?"

"Just fine," Talons assured her. "The Spiritdancer is repairing and making improvements on her."

"She pulled the blade?" Laurelyanne asked.

"Yes. We need some blankets. I want to keep her warm while the sword does its work."

Tagalong knelt beside Aeijys. Her skin had turned a glossy black with sapphire hues. Her hair was now palest cornsilk with a fringe of red and black surrounding her face. Her ears were delicately pointed, but otherwise her features were unchanged. All the scars and blemishes were gone. Her hands were folded across the sword-hilt; her expression peaceful; yet disturbingly suggestive of the way they laid out dead ha'taren. The strange feathered creature curled protectively around her looked vaguely like a dragon to Tagalong.

"What are you?"

Skelly rolled his eyes and answered irritably. "I'm a feathered dragon. Actually I'm far more than that, but I'm not ready to go into that just now. Just call me Skelly and we'll get along fine."

"Okay." Tagalong sounded doubtful.

Dynarien pushed his way past the other mages, kneeling beside Aeijys. He glanced up at Skelly.

"Do you know what I am?" Skelly asked still more irritably since the fellow smelled of magery and divinity.

"You're a quetzalcoatlys."

Skelly's irritation dissolved completely. "How'd you know?"

Dynarien leaned close and whispered in Skelly's ear, "I'm Dynarien Willodarusson."

"The Rose Warrior?" Skelly managed a creditable whisper back.

"Yes."

"Glad to meet you," Skelly said, putting on his most polite manners. He extended a claw to Dynarien who gasped one of the long, dagger-like talons and they shook.

"Do you have any idea how long this will take?"

"It varies. But this one seems particularly complex. It has been going on for four hours now. If you'll ask the others to move out of earshot, I'll tell you what I think."

Dynarien nodded. He took the frowning Tagalong by the shoulders and turned her firmly about. "Go on."

"He's a fuckin' dragon," Tagalong complained.

"We'll be fine, Tag. Skelly's a quetzalcoatlys. They're the only dragons that, as a group, rejected the Waejontori. He's a good dragon."

Talons and Little Bit moved away, joining the mages behind the shields.

"But Dynarien!"

"Go. Now."

Tagalong walked off muttering, "Puddin' head paladins an' their idjit mages... Stupider yuwenghaus..."

When Skelly was satisfied their privacy was guaranteed, he told Dynarien, "I smelled divinity and Nym blood as well as the usual Sharani/sylvan mixes. You're lucky she hasn't sprouted wings." He glanced at Aejys quickly to be certain he was not misspeaking himself. "Nym grow up by becoming Jesmyrran."

"Seriously?" Dynarien smiled, wondering if he should caution the dragon about betraying his grandsire's secrets.

"Absolutely. It's a big secret. So don't tell any – oh my! Look. The Dancer must have decided on the wings after all."

Aejys turned on her side without waking. Talons' cloak slipped down as the wings developed, bright azure feathers tipped in scarlet.

"Amazing. Truly amazing. This is Dancer's greatest transformation. So much to work with." Skelly sniffed at Aejys. "She smells like an Abelard."

Realization hit Dynarien. "Shared Life."

"Ahhhhh! Ishla and I discussed that spell soon after he cast it the first time. Did you know it could alter the genetic structure? Gene bonding, she called it."

The ground shook hard, knocking Dynarien from his feet. He grabbed at Skelly's head.

"Hold onto me!" Skelly cried. His huge claw closed around Dynarien's waist and he pulled the mage close, nestling him against his side, wedging Dynarien into the curve of his body with Aejs.

The sky darkened as the volcano roared. Lightning sprang into the sky. One side of the volcano disappeared. Molten rock poured forth from cracks, splintering the side of the mountain, which slid slowly and then faster down into the flow.

"This is bad," Skelly said. "Firefinder can't hold it."

A shout went up from the company. "The fireborn! The fireborn are coming!"

Dozens of them came in wide sweeps, diving into the volcanic flow and rising again glowing with the fire and power they absorbed. One wing broke off from the others and entered the cone itself. Gradually the volcano quieted.

\* \* \* \*

Laurelyanne climbed into the back of the wagon, frowning. Josiah kept giving the healers fits, begging for a drink so that he could access the magic – which was what had gotten him in trouble in the first place. Dree lay curled up against Josiah. He opened his eyes, focusing with effort.

"Is ... is it true? Aejs?"

"Yes. She's alive. She's here."

"I want ... to see her."

"No. If you start moving around, you'll kill yourself. That was a foolish thing to do. First you get nearly cut to ribbons and then you cast that damned spell on top of it all so you can get cut up some more."

Josiah sighed. "Couldn't let him ... let him hurt her."

"Well, your heart is in the right place," Laurelyanne said, grudgingly.

Josiah tried to sit up and fell heavily back, hammered by pain and weakness. "Please, help me. I want to see her."

Dree raced suddenly out of the wagon.

"No. You will start those wounds bleeding again. And thanks to that foolish spell, you will exhaust what little strength you have started to get back. No."

"Please..."

"Ask again, child, and I will spell you out for a week."

Dree returned, followed by Dynarien.

"If I carry him, will you let him go?" Dynarien asked.

Laurelyanne shook her head, rolling her eyes as if despairing of their foolishness. She wanted to say no, but said, "Yes," Instead.

Dynarien wrapped Josiah in a blanket – they were still having trouble keeping him warm – and lifted him out of the wagon.

The Valdren smiled and nodded as they passed. Some called him "Lord" and wished him a "good day." The Sharanis studied him, wondering at what the Valdren attitude toward him meant and just what he might be lord of. Clemmerick fell in beside them.

"Josiah?"

Josiah glanced at Clemmerick, managing a small smile. Although Dynarien was as gentle as possible, Josiah's wounds hurt in response to every little movement.

"Let me carry him," Clemmerick said. "He's my friend."

Dynarien regarded the huge ogre for a moment. "You're Clemmerick? I'm Dynarien," he added at the ogre's nod.

"I know all about you, Rose Warrior," Clemmerick told him as he took Josiah from him. Grymlyken emerged from Clemmerick's pocket and settled on his shoulder, holding onto his collar to smile at Josiah and listen to the conversation better. He did not interrupt. This whole thing was getting to be a bit much for the little fellow and more and more he wished he were back in the tavern with the whole adventure over. Too many people he cared about were getting hurt and it bothered him. Life had been far simpler when all Grymlyken had to worry about was breaking up a few drunken brawls each night.

"Does everyone in camp know who I am?" Dynarien sounded a tiny bit exasperated.

"Everyone who recognizes the blazon." Clemmerick nodded at the shield. "My

mother is a poet. Are you taking him to Aejys?"

"Yes."

Skelly watched them coming and when they were close, he shoved his big nose against Josiah, taking a good sniff. "Smells like an Abelard."

"Josiah Abelard. Her lover," Dynarien explained.

Clemmerick looked startled, remembering how Josiah had sworn, in the throes of a drunken confession nearly a year ago, that he would never tell Aejys that he loved her. Carefully and gently, the big ogre settled his friend beside his liege-lord. Aejys still slept, wrapped in the magic of the Dancer.

"The mage-master himself?" Skelly was surprised.

The blankets slipped away from Aejys as she turned without waking, revealing her perfect breasts. Josiah tried to turn onto his side and pull the blankets over her, but fell back with a soft groan at the rush of pain and dizziness. Dynarien's manhood reacted and he sighed, before bending over them and straightening the blankets himself. He hoped that Talons would appreciate the suffering his abstinence was causing him.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

### **BATTLE OF NORENDELL**

The layout of the camp had been changed significantly to accommodate Skelly, since the dragon insisted on taking part in the conversations. It had taken Dynarien most of the night to convince Skelly to allow him to move Aejys and Josiah into the command tent. Tagalong had objected loudly to Dynarien's putting them in bed together. She simply could not believe that they were, as Dynarien claimed, lovers. It seemed like the sheerest nonsense. Aejys had better sense than to take a sloppy sot into her bed. But Aejys still drowsed through the last of the Dancer's changes, and Tagalong could not ask her. Laurelyanne and Borian had come to Dynarien's defense in the ensuing argument, leaving Tagalong out-voted.

The others sat in a circle around them.

"We came for a fight," Soren said, "but it doesn't look like we're going to get one." The aged ha'taren had to work hard not to simply stare at Skelly. The very last thing she had ever expected to do in her life was to hold a civilized conversation with a dragon. Dragons were not only the emblems of Waejontor, they had frequently appeared as allies to the sa'necari over the centuries. Yet here she was talking to Skelly.

"You'll get one," Skelly said. "The pass is closed, but there are thousands of caves and tunnels. They'll be back."

"When?"

"Soon. A day or two. Maybe a week. No more than that. There is too much at stake here." Skelly started ticking the reasons off on his claws and, although everyone pretty much knew them, no one wanted to interrupt a dragon. "Dree's children. Carliff's valley. The sword, they can't afford the Dancer getting loose in the world again. The breeding grounds. I cannot leave the wielder before she awakens. I am charged with guarding her through the changes. Else I would make a scouting flight. I am very good at aerial reconnaissance"

"We can," Talons said, stroking Little Bit. She climbed into the saddle. Little Bit ran off into the open, spread his wings, and leaped into the air.

"How much longer is this transformation going to take," Tagalong asked again. "It's been over twelve hours."

"I don't know," Skelly said. "It's never taken more than four until now."

\* \* \* \*

Josiah felt Aeijys stir next to him and, if he had had the strength, would have put his arms around her.

Aeijys raised herself up on an elbow and looked down at him with so much love it brought tears of gratitude to his eyes. She could see how weak he appeared. She stroked his face. "Thank the gods, you're alive. I thought I'd lost you." Aeijys sat up, her wings poking the edge of the tent, and bent over him, her lips brushing his. "I love you."

\* \* \* \*

Talons flew low over the mountain. The base had widened, the summit fallen by half. The forest was a smoking ruin for a three-hour flight in all directions, overturned, and blackened trees. The air stank. Little Bit balked and required a good deal of reassuring to keep going. The ground still glowed with heat. Talons flew toward the mouth of the gorge. It looked like it might be passable if the ground would ever cool enough. She continued until she was in sight of the castle without finding any sign of an army. It might well be that they had destroyed the bulk of Hoon's forces when the volcano exploded, but somehow she doubted it. Then she took a different way back to spare Little Bit the bad air around the now silent volcano.

\* \* \* \*

Within a week Josiah was moving about the camp with Aejs supporting him. Jumpfree procured her some Jesmyrran clothing and light armor – she would need to learn to handle weight better before she could wear chain or plate on the wing. Her wings, azure with scarlet tips, fascinated Jumpfree. He reached out and touched them every chance he got, shaking his head in wonderment. The Jesmyrran did not mate outside their own kind and the Badree Nym were just children. He could not figure out where she had gotten them. And if anyone knew, they were not telling.

Aejys now drew every male eye, and many female ones, when she passed. She found that a bit uncomfortable. The Dancer had made her one of a kind, a creature of statuesque beauty where before she had been merely handsome in the Sharani fashion. Josiah's reaction was a joy; his manhood came to full attention the moment she disrobed. She suspected that Tamlestari's reaction would be just as joyous and she wondered if, with her sylvan looks, Queen Magdarien would still find her objectionable as Tamlestari's mate.

Tagalong put up with the way Josiah and Aejs looked together as long as she could – it reminded her painfully of the way Aejs and Brendorn had been so very long ago. Tagalong had loved Brendorn as much as Aejs and Josiah did not measure up. They camped eight days later near a stream, close to where the fireborn had interdicted the lava flow. Tagalong picked that evening to confront Aejs on the subject of Josiah.

Aejys was down at the stream alone when Tagalong caught up with her. "It's time we talked," Tagalong said. "Sleepin' with Josiah is bad judgment."

"Tag," Aejs said patiently. "I love him, but I'm not going to argue with you. The subject is out of bounds. You cannot begin to understand what I have gone through this last year."

Her words and tone took the wind out of Tagalong's sails. "Maybe I can't. But ya should at least try me."

"I'm no longer a paladin. I'm no longer ha'taren," Aejs said softly, her eyes distant. "My god has abandoned me."

Tagalong blinked. She could hear the distress beneath the words. "Why?"

Aejys sighed heavily. She did a lot of that since awakening from the Dancer's spell. "It ... Dragonshead was like going through Bucharsa all over again ... only worse. Far worse." She covered her face with her hands, struggling to control the deep, shuddering sighs. "I – I lost it completely ... gave into despair... Oh sweet gods, Tag... I...I accepted Hoon's blood."

Tagalong's eyes saucered. Aejs had committed a blasphemy. It did not seem possible. "But yer all right now? Aren't ya?"

"My body and soul. But my heart? I just don't know, Tag. I just don't know. The only thing that has kept me going since Dragonshead has been Josiah."

Tagalong thought about that and decided to keep her objections to herself. "Then if he's what ya need, he's what ya need. Ya won't hear another peep outta me."

"Thank you." Aeijys grabbed Tagalong, hugging her impulsively. "You're the best friend anyone could ever have."

\* \* \* \*

"It is hard to snare her mind," Galee told Bryndel as they approached the camp. "I will only be able to hold her for a few minutes, then you must get the drug down her."

Bryndel nodded, walking faster and leaving her behind. "Talons!"

"Bryndel? What the hell are you doing here?" Talons demanded. "I – I mean..." She blinked as an odd warmth swept over her, running to Bryndel and embracing him, hungrily, attempting to kiss him.

"Not yet," he murmured. "You must have the medicine first." He pulled the vial from his pocket, pressing it into her hand.

Talons blushed, pulled the stopper, and drank. "I'm an untrained bi-kyndi," she explained to Tagalong and the others watching her. "This blunts it. I don't want to risk hurting him."

"Uh, okay," Tagalong said.

Talons turned back into Bryndel's arms, kissing him deeply. "I love you," she told him. Then she turned to the gathered people and told them, "This is my betrothed. We are to be married soon."

\* \* \* \*

Her body would not answer and she knew she had been drugged. There were two large males in the room besides Bryndel. Then she saw another figure, muffled in a cloak with a scarf pulled around its face. Talons could not say whether this one was male or female.

"Why don't you just turn her," Bryndel told the cloaked figure.

"I cannot. Hadjys has marked her." The voice was familiar. Female. "Give her another dose before you begin. Besides, we need her pregnant to force the marriage. We can't take the chance that she can persuade her grandsire to back out on it." *And when all of you are dead or turned, I will be regent for the children. The children*

*are for me, you stupid little human. You are all my cattle; you just haven't realized it yet. Eventually the Sharani blood will have to be culled from my Creeyan herds. But first I must finish taking Creeya. Then a Guild war against Shaurone.*

The two males grabbed Talons' head, pinioning it while Bryndel forced the liquid down her throat.

"I'm sorry, Talons," Bryndel murmured, stroking her head. Each time Galee dragged him into another round of this he began to feel more conflicted and confused. He was terrified of Galee; terrified of the way she could work him up into doing things he would not normally do, almost as if she got into his mind. And then he had to wonder: was she in his mind? Why was he doing this? His stomach tightened. "If it's any comfort, you won't remember any of this." He glanced at the larger of the two males. "Begin."

The male opened his pants and mounted her. As soon as he had sheathed himself inside her, the kyndi flared and the male fell dead across her. The cloaked figure pulled him off, throwing him aside as if he weighed nothing.

"The dosage still isn't right," the figure cursed.

At Bryndel's nod, the second mon took her, but this time the kyndi remained silent. Bryndel smiled. "You are finished here," he told them. The mon started to leave, but the other figure stepped up to him, flexed a long fingered hand and nails slid out of their sheaths. The mon's eyes widened, but before he could move, the nails had plunged into the arteries in his arms, discharging their venom. He collapsed without a sound.

"I must have a taste of her." Gylorean Galee removed the scarf. She opened her mouth, her fangs slowly extended until they were long needles. She nuzzled Talons' loins, licking away the male juices, and then she reared back and struck. At the sharp pain and sucking, Talons tried to cry out but her throat would not work. When she finished, Galee slithered atop Talons' body, cut her wrist, and put it to Talons' mouth, forcing her to swallow. "I can't turn her," Galee explained, "but this makes it easier to influence her mind. With each feeding, I will be able to hold her for longer and longer periods." Since Talons did not accept the blood willingly, Hadjys would not abandon her – Galee was raping her soul with the blood as Bryndel did her body.

Gylorean Galee rose, wrapped her cloak around herself, and vanished with the bodies. Bryndel slid into the blankets of Talons' bedroll and pulled them over him as he began his ride.

\* \* \* \*

Talons woke in her blankets, feeling slightly sick. Her head ached. She was naked and had no memory of removing her clothes. Then her shoulder brushed another

warm body as she turned over. "No," she growled, recognizing Bryndel's form. She kicked him out of the bedroll hard. "Get the hell out of here!" She cried. "Get out, get out, get out!"

Bryndel gave her a pained look. "Beloved, what did I do wrong this time? Last night you told everyone you loved me. You kissed me in front of them."

Talons grabbed his clothes and threw them in his face. "Get dressed and get out."

Bryndel shrugged. "As you wish, beloved." He dressed and left.

As he emerged from Talons' tent, he caught sight of Tagalong watching him. He gave her an embarrassed grin and a shrug. "She's upset with me again. Don't understand it."

Tagalong laughed.

\* \* \* \*

Talons sat with the blankets held tight around her, tears of humiliation and anger running down her face. She had come all this way to escape this, only to have it come after her. She felt disoriented and frightened.

"Dynarien. Dynarien. Dynarien," she sobbed quietly. This was not something she could fight with claws or blade. She did not know how to fight it at all.

The scent of roses filled the tent. Dynarien appeared in front of her and she grabbed him.

"Bryndel's here."

"I know. Everyone in camp is talking about it. You told them you were in love with him. You've lost all hope of convincing your grandsire – or anyone else – otherwise. They can just waltz you around until no one will believe you." Dynarien took her wrist and Read her. There was something odd about the Reading this time. "Lie down."

Talons obeyed.

He threw the blankets away, his eyes taking in every inch of her. His manhood reacted, but he kept it under control with an effort.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for something." He spied a spot of red on her inner thigh and spread her legs. "Sweet creation!"

"What is it?"

"Fresh fang marks. The creature has fed on you again. Could Bryndel be a vampire?"

"No. I've known him since we were in diapers. He goes out in the daylight all the time."

"Then he's in league with one. Furthermore there are vampires that can go out in the daylight. Several lineages and species in fact. Collectively, they call themselves the royals. What most people think of as vampires are what are called the lesser bloods."

Talons was silent for a long while. She drew the blankets back around her. "My grandsire does not care how he gets more heirs, so long as he gets them – it makes me feel like some kind of broodmare being shoved into a breeding pen; the way he lets Bryndel do this to me." Talons' eyes gleamed with angry tears. "I'm losing all sense of myself somehow. I never thought anything could hurt so badly. But I'm going to get them, Dynarien. I'm going to get them all. I'm not centered anymore and I don't know how to get back there."

"Some of that could be the drugs," Dynarien suggested, "or the shock of your encounters with the vampire, whoever he is."

"It doesn't matter what caused it – only that it is. I was never a player ... it isn't like taking out a target, making a kill. Now I'm deep in a game I don't really know how to play and I don't think I can win it and I can't take them down with me like I did the troll. There is no clean kill in this."

"Talons..."

"Let me finish. I promised my grandsire that I would not harm Bryndel while allowing him to court me. So grandsire gets his wedding. But afterward I intend for Bryndel to have an accident. His father also. I'll be pregnant by then. Everyone will think it's Bryndel's, but it won't be. I'll then be regent for the Wrathscar lands and titles as well as heir to the crown."

"What are you planning?" Dynarien asked suspiciously. If she intended to give her grandsire an heir and it would not be Bryndel's, then whose would it be? Was there another male in her life?

"Well, they have made this a war and a war they will have. I intend to take out their allies as well. They can wonder who is doing it while I hang on Bryndel's every word. Do you have any of those souls with you?"

"Yes. Always." This was not how he wanted to finally touch her. Dynarien wanted it to be an act of love, not vengeance.

"You're yuwenghau ... what effect will the bi-kyndi have on you? Will I hurt you?"

"No. You mean that's all that's been keeping you from letting me touch you?"

Talons smiled then, a sweet, yet sad, unguarded smile. "I wish I had asked you that months ago."

"I – I love you."

"I know." She pulled him down on top of her as she laid back. "What souls do you have?"

"A battlemage; a moonmage, one of Tala's favorites – he was a hunter as well; and a warrior."

"I want the battlemage."

"Why don't I just give you all three?"

"You can do that?"

"Yes."

"Then do it. Another thing, can the genetics be hidden? I mean, with all the drugs they've been giving me, it could be blamed on that if the Reader decides to go deeper than I want him too."

"That also."

"Stick it in and get it over with fast. Then get out before Bryndel comes back."

"Talons..."

"I know. I love you, but there isn't time for it now. Come to me later when we'll not be caught." Talons trembled violently as she opened her legs wide to him. She knew, though she could not remember it, that Bryndel had been inside her. Her thighs and womanhood were slick and wet with his juices. She hated him. She was about to change her life entirely in ways she thought unthinkable even days ago. She would destroy Bryndel and his allies. But what about the children? Could she raise them with love when all they were was a path and means to vengeance? A way for her grandsire to have his lineage continued through her and seal a political alliance he felt he needed?*I'll try. I'll try hard to be good to them. To love them. They are innocent of what I'm doing. It isn't their fault I'm doing this.*

Dynarien's heart eased, but it did not rejoice. He started to disrobe and she stopped him.

"Just open your pants," she told him.

He obeyed, lifting himself out. He reached for her breasts to caress them and she stiffened.

"Don't. Don't touch me. This isn't about love." She shivered. In her heart she still wanted to be caressed by him, but her anger at Bryndel overrode her needs. She just wanted to get it done with, to not engage her emotions – emotions made one slow, they got in the way. When this was done, Bryndel would not be able to force his child into her – which was what he wanted. He wanted to trap her, but she was about to turn the tables on him.

Dynarien sucked in a deep breath and sighed unhappily. She lifted her pelvis toward him. He stared down at the sweet lips of her loins and hesitated. "Let me at least hold your hand so I can Read you as we do this."

"So be it."

He took hold of her and began to Read as he entered her. His pants rubbed roughly against her thighs as he moved. She wrapped her legs around him to bring him as deep as possible. It felt good. She shivered more violently. His cock found the places where her female lovers went with their long fingers. She moaned softly before she could stop herself. Her hand tightened on his. The bi-kyndi had not roused. Apparently she still had too much of the drug in her system for it to react.

In the chill, emotionless joining Talons demanded, he came quickly. He felt her conceive and then it was over. She shoved him away and sat up, wiping herself clean with the blanket corner.

"Now, bind the kyndi," she ordered brusquely. "And conceal the genetics."

Dynarien put his hand on her stomach above her ovaries and spoke to them. A tingling sensation ran through Talons and then disappeared.

"Finished?"

"Yes."

"Get out of here before someone sees you." She started dressing, ignoring him completely.

\* \* \* \*

He chose to be discreet and simply Jumped from the tent to the middle of the encampment. Josiah was walking arm and arm with Aejys as he arrived. They looked happy. That only made Dynarien feel worse. His had been a hasty joining and not at

all what he had either imagined or desired for his first time with Talons. He felt crushed by her brusque dismissal as soon as the children settled in her womb.

Dree rushed out of a tent and leaped onto his shoulder, purring into his ear.

"Not now, Dree," he told her.

*<What's wrong? >* She asked him.

*<Everything, >* he replied and poured out his story to her.

*<Might I make a suggestion?>*

*<Of course . >*

*<Well, Talons is going to be very busy with Bryndel and the wedding plans. Jysy and Arruth will need someone else to act as their sponsor now. Perhaps you should clear it with Hadjys and then talk to the Patriarch. >*

Dynarien brightened. *<I could do that. >*

*<Yes and take a bunch of catkin with you. They served you well at Dragonshead, didn't they? And who's going to notice a lot of extra cats, considering how frequently real cats reproduce. And no one can tell them apart. >*

*<Better and better. >*

*<And start calling yourself a mage. It's more believable and less conspicuous . >*

*<Do you want to come? >*

*<No. I need to find my kittens before Margren and Mephistis do and get them to safety. >*

Dree jumped down and ran off.

\* \* \* \*

Talons lay for a long time in the blankets, her hands pressing her stomach. It would be months before she felt the children stir. Dynarien had also blocked the bi-kyndi, casting kweigeyl. That was in and of itself an odd thing that only a yuwenghau could achieve. Life would have been far better if she had only known sooner what questions to ask. She dressed quickly and went in search of Bryndel, leaving the top four buttons of her shirt undone so that he could stare down her cleavage. She found him sitting at the central fire looking exaggeratedly morose.

*He's probably planning on writing off my hostility to a lover's spat. He's in for a*

*serious surprise.* Talons sat down beside him, slipped her arm around him, and nibbled his ear. "Bryndel, maybe these episodes have been my mind's way of telling me something I didn't realize. I don't know if I love you, but I'm willing to try. After you left, I found an Ishlani mage-friend and she blocked the bi-kyndi. I don't need the medicine anymore."

"She did?" Bryndel squeaked, then recovered himself. "You don't?" He noticed the rounded edges of her breasts showing. It was so unlike Talons that it startled and drew him. He licked his lips.

Talons pressed a deep kiss on his mouth, which produced nothing, no sign of the bi-kyndi's usual reaction. "Let me prove it. There's a lovely little copse by the stream..."

Talons led him away to the stream bank, where she knelt and pushed through the bushes on all fours. She and Dynarien had sat there the day before talking. Bryndel's hand caressed her buttocks tentatively. She wiggled them at him and then shoved them in his face before crawling through to the bank. Talons settled by the water. She slipped out of her shirt and breastband before he joined her, turning to face him.

He gasped and stared as if seeing them for the first time.

"Isn't this what you want?" She cupped them, thumbing her nipples suggestively, calculating each move and motion. Her mind was totally clear, cold and deadly focused. At eleven, she had deliberately and knowingly killed a pedophile with a kiss, avenging twenty raped and murdered girls. Perhaps that was how she would kill Bryndel. Perhaps she would just stick him.

Bryndel sucked in a sharp breath.

"Maybe the medicine had a side effect. Maybe that's what prevents me from remembering those wonderful nights we've had. With the bi-kyndi blocked I don't need the medicine. I'll remember from now on."

Bryndel looked uneasy. Did she know? No. She couldn't. If she did, she would have killed him already. He knew Talons well enough to be certain of that.

She caught his shoulders and pulled him close, rubbing her breasts in his face. His mouth closed on her nipple and he sucked it briefly, just enough to bring it erect, but not enough to satisfy her. She knew then that his lovemaking would be perfunctory at best. She thought of Edouina, her favorite lover, who could spend hours just on her breasts. She and Edouina had long considered handfasting. Could they make this marriage a Sharani style triading? Edouina was a bi-kyndi master; she could reduce Bryndel to a shivering idiot. Yes, Bryndel would like Edouina.

Bryndel climbed out of his clothes and grabbed at her pants. He was breathing hard with excitement. He was thick and long and hard – almost as much so as Dynarien.

Talons twisted away from him, stood, and slithered out of her pants. Once the children were born, the alliance and inheritances secured, Edouina would help her discreetly kill him. She began to shimmy slowly, rotating her hips and thrusting her pelvis. *Maybe I'll cut his balls off and make him choke to death on them.*

Bryndel's face burned with delight and joy. He came to her on all fours, burying his face in her thick, black thatch. He wrapped his arms around her hips. She moved her pelvis against his face while he licked and probed her with his tongue. Talons bent forward, rubbing her breasts across his neck. He bored too quickly and pulled her onto the ground, again leaving her unsatisfied. She said nothing. Her loins had barely begun to moisten when he shoved into her. It hurt and she gasped sharply. It took him forever to come. Her juices dried and still he sawed at her relentlessly. Finally he spilled forth and collapsed atop her.

*Maybe I'll stake him out and pile stones on his stomach until something ruptures.*

Bryndel lay a long time atop her, savoring the feel of her body beneath his, in total submission to him, finally trapped by his sheer maleness. Galee had thought it would take longer to bring her to heel with the drugs and vampiric coercions.

"Bryndel, I'd like to have another go, but if we don't get back soon, someone is bound to come looking for us."

Bryndel rolled off her reluctantly and laid back to watch her dress.

She took her time so that he could see every inch of her. She bent and kissed him. "You know," she purred, "if we keep this up, grandsire will have to hurry the wedding."

"Why?"

"Because I'll get pregnant, silly. Sharani are notoriously fertile. Seriously, Bryndel, I never realized before how much pleasure I would get from having a male between my legs. You're wonderful." *Maybe I'll get one of those marble priapuses and rape him to death. Let's see how much he likes having something hard shoved up his unwilling ass with no grease.*

Bryndel's cheeks flushed. "You want my child?"

"Yes," she said, kissing him again. "My work here is done. Aejs has the sword. We could be home in no time. And this kind of stuff is much more fun in a bed." She rubbed her breasts against him. "Let's pack up." She began to imagine what his corpse would look like when she finished with him.

\* \* \* \*

Scouts had already been deployed to have a closer glimpse at what the gorge looked like and check the area around the caves and tunnels for signs of incursions. The ground was still hot; it burned through the soles of their boots quickly. They could not cross through the gorge. The fireborn were arriving in greater and greater numbers each day. There were now three full wings of twenty-one each in the van. There was no sign of Carliff or his forces, for they had withdrawn to the north in case Mephistis should actually try for their fortress. That was just as well, for in the heat of battle all undead looked alike.

Word came back that the gorge appeared to be impassible. However Jumpfree had a solution to that: he would jump the entire army past it in a single go. The next problem to consider was that Aeijys did not want any of Hoon's people and creatures escaping through the occupied zone and back into Waejontor.

With Kalestari acting as courier, word was sent to Anaria Dovane, Regent of Danae, Shaurone. Anaria controlled the occupied zone that bordered her lands and fronted on Hoon's Valley. It took another week to work out the details, but during that time, Anaria's people had discovered the remains of her daughter who had been murdered by Mephistis. Every thing started to fall into place. Readers confirmed Mephistis' part in the murder by comparing genetic material gathered from the other victims along his line of march from Dragonshead to Danae. Anaria's grief quickly became rage and she marshaled her substantial forces for an assault from the south. Nothing and no one was getting out of Hoon's Valley. The Sharani would hit them from the south at the same time that the fireborn and the Valdren invaded from the north. They would neither ask nor give quarter.

\* \* \* \*

Jumpfree, Aeijys, and Skelly winged past the mountain. They could see the heat still rising from it. They flew for hours before they saw green fields again.

"What do you think?" Aeijys asked. "Can you get them this far?"

Jumpfree considered. "Yes. If we get them as close to the other end of the burn as we can."

"Come on, Skelly, let's go down, and have a look around." Aeijys flew down, lighting in a meadow. The grass was a rich, healthy green, carpeted with white flowers. Aeijys shivered, she had never seen them grow so thick. "Asphodel," she breathed the word, the hair rising on her arms. She walked across the meadow into the trees. The flowers grew beneath the trees, deep in shadow where they should not have been for want of light and yet there they were. She ran back into the open and took wing, feeling a pressure in her chest, skimming the ground. Every inch, no matter how far she flew across the gorge, was covered in asphodel – the flower of death.

Jumpfree followed her closely, his head tilted, frowning in puzzlement. He did a

loop-the-loop to stroke her wings.

"Why do you do that?"

"Because they're pretty," he said. "Is something wrong down there?"

"Those flowers are asphodel."

"Is that bad?"

"They're death flowers, young one," Skelly supplied.

"Do they kill people?" Jumpfree asked.

"No," Aeijys told him, putting on speed and flying back toward Norendel. "They grow on battlefields and places where people have died in large numbers. Do you have any idea how much blood has to have soaked the soil to have produced so many flowers?"

"Ooooooooooh!"

\* \* \* \*

Aeijys sat at the small table beside Josiah and Laurelyanne with Soren, Tagalong, and Borian. Jumpfree sat cross-legged on a chest near the flap beside Dynarien.

"Let Hoon see the army if he wants, but not Skelly or the fireborn. We move the winged ones at night. Hide them in the forests by day. Let him feel confident in his walls."

"Another thing," said a new voice as a crested head poked in through the flap and Kalestari entered. "I believe a single flight of fireborn should be dispatched to the Regent's forces." Aeijys stood up and went to her, dropping to her knees to hug the fireborn. "That way they do not have to worry with bringing siege engines through the gorge. Let Hoon settle down for a long siege, and then we'll tear his walls down." The fireborn, who could reduce her size to that of a large dog, waddled slowly into the tent and settled beside the table. "The one thing I miss about my human body is the occasional glass of wine."

"Why didn't ya say somethin'," Tagalong shouted. She immediately dug a bowl out of the chest at the end of the bed and filled it with wine. "Try that."

Kalestari lapped it. "Uhhmm! That's good. What's the vintage?"

"Faewin. It was a gift from Geoa's na'halaef," Soren said before she thought. No one had told Kalestari that Geoa had remarried.

The entire tent went silent. The fireborn's head drooped. "She thought I was dead. She had a right to get on with her life. I am dead." Kalestari shook herself, settled her feathers, and went back to lapping the wine. "When I leave here, I'll take a flight of fireborn with me to the Regent. Anaria will be entering the gorge tomorrow. Barring unforeseen circumstances, she should reach the castle in three days. Four at most. You need to move out first thing tomorrow. If you have dispatches going back, Aejys, get them ready."

"Jumpfree, inform the winged ones, support units and the auxiliaries to move out immediately."

"You're not leaving me behind, Aejys," Josiah said, his eyes searching her face.

"I want to," she said, her voice soft with concern. "But I did that to some others that I loved and they're dead. I won't do that to you. I'm not going to say good-bye, because it isn't. Get out of here. I'll see you in Hoon's Valley."

Josiah nodded and left with Laurelyanne. They would be traveling with the winged ones and the auxiliaries, since Laurelyanne felt the stress of a Jump could hurt Josiah in his weakened condition.

"Kalestari, I think you'd better collect your flight before they all take off," Aejys said. "We'll go tonight. Camp in the valley."

The fireborn nodded, following the others out.

The winged units, ferrying wagons and supplies, were given a four-hour head start. The column, organized in a square formation, stood at the edge of the cooling lava. Jumpfree circled the center, his power rushed through them in a tingling of nerves. Horses screamed. Then they were gone.

The troops materialized in the middle of the asphodel meadow, feeling momentarily disoriented. Scouts were immediately ordered out. Even with the head start, the company arrived ahead of the auxiliaries and was camped and waiting when the winged ones arrived at dawn.

The horses were hitched to the wagons and the columns formed up. The fireborn dispersed into forests finding what cover their huge bodies could beneath the largest trees and settled to sleep away the daylight hours. Skelly found a river and sank into its depths where his pastel feathers became just one more reflection of the light upon the water. The quetzalcoatli were fishing dragons.

A village was spotted at midday. Aejys ordered it quietly encircled before she rode in and had the villagers taken in hand. A priest read them for the taint of sa'necari and undeath. Those that were found with it were destroyed. The others were taken prisoner and brought along. She could take no chances with them.

They made camp that night on a small rise above a stream.

"Do you think they know we're out here, yet?" Aejs asked.

"They are aware of the Regent's forces," Kalestari told her, enjoying a bowl of wine. "We've had some skirmishes with shifters. Nothing serious yet."

"I'm sure they suspect," Soren said, "But unless they've scryed us..."

"Not likely," Dynarien replied. "I've kept the wards up. I haven't felt anyone testing them."

"Hoon doesn't know about Jumpfree, so he probably thinks we can't get past the lava yet. Now, if we're finished," Aejs said, rising, "I have a few things to take care of." She walked out.

Dynarien followed her. "Josiah?"

Aejs nodded, her face tight. "I shouldn't have brought him. The pace we're setting..."

They reached the healer's wagon and Aejs climbed in first, folding her wings tightly. She knelt beside him, took his hand, and kissed him. Dynarien crouched near the door watching them, thinking, reading the lines of pain in Josiah's face that should not have been there.

"Aejs, could you leave us alone for a moment, I want to check him over, not just a Reading."

"All right," Aejs left the wagon.

Dynarien moved beside Josiah and Read him. "You're not going to tell her, are you?" It was more an accusation than a question.

"No. I've forbidden Laurelyanne to also. Let her believe I'll get better. So long as I don't overtire myself it will seem like I am. My body was damaged to begin with ... I just finished it off. Please, don't tell her."

"I won't. You won't see winter solstice, you know that. I doubt you'll make it to autumn."

"I never liked autumn."

"I'll talk to my father, see if he has any suggestions."

"Thank you."

\* \* \* \*

A group of riders crested a small rise in the distance, hesitated, and then turned tail.

"Do we go after them, majesty?" Soren asked.

"No," Aeijys answered. "It's time Hoon knew for certain we were here. He'll have to split his forces between the Regent and us now. But I still don't want him to know about the fireborn and Skelly." She turned in the saddle, glancing over her shoulder. "Dynarien, drop the scry wards on the column, but keep them up on the winged ones."

\* \* \* \*

Hoon stood on the north battlement watching Aeijys' troops set up with great interest, just as he had the Regent's army the day before. He paused to wonder how Aeijys could have gotten her army across the lava and the blocked gorge. He had lost the bulk of his skeleton army when the volcano exploded, but his elite units of vampires, sa'necari, and revenants were still in the castle. Granted, their numbers were not large compared to the roughly twelve thousand myn the Regent and Aeijys fielded around his castle, but the attackers had brought no siege engines of any kind. If they thought to starve him out they were idiots. This was a castle of the undead. They did not need to eat. When they had devoured all the living within the castle, they would simply go out devour their uninvited guests. How incredibly foolish.

"What do you make of this, Hoon?" Mephistis asked.

"Not even Abelard can blow holes in the walls."

"He knocked the ruins at Dragonshead down and shattered pieces of the altar of hecatomb."

"Margren used a rite of hecatomb, one hundred deaths, to send a mage-storm and vargeis after Aeijys. Abelard then combined his power with hers, turned hers back, and hit with both of them. The undead cannot achieve that, so that freakish spell combination cannot be recreated. However, if I had an altar of hecatomb, I might chance it. I will build one someday."

"And where would you put it?"

"Minnoras. Tell me, Mephistis, if I could make a death-angel and if, as is claimed, a sa'necari can possess all the powers of the undead, a sa'necari could be created that could then take on the powers of that death-angel. How powerful would that sa'necari then become?"

Mephistis looked startled. "That sa'necari would become a god."

"And if that sa'necari was a yuwenghau to begin with?"

"You are a dangerous dreamer Hoon. And you begin to frighten me." Mephistis turned and left the walls.

"I would not need to free the Hellgod, I would make a new one."

\* \* \* \*

"I have no idea what we will find when we crack the outer wall," Aejs said. They held the final meeting in a circle in the center of the camp. Clemmerick, Skelly, Tagalong, and Kalestari grouped to one side; Borian and some of his scouts beside them, representing both the scouts and rangers. Soren and her officers stood with Aejs. Laurelyanne and Dynarien presenting for the handful of Valdren and fireborn mages.

"Originally the city was called Sweetwillow and the valley is Errilyn," Laurelyanne said.

"Why didn't you say anything sooner?" Aejs asked.

"Because, when I was a child, my mother made me promise not to say it until I stood again before the gates. I imagine the only thing you'll find is the undead and their cattle."

"It will be sword work all the way," Aejs said. "Heavy cavalry first. Infantry next, breaking to the sides. Mages center. Watch out for the sa'necari. Let's hope there's no surprises. We are going straight for the keep. We're all veterans, we know what we're up against."

"One thing, I'd like to say," Dynarien stepped forward, "I'd like to make myself better known now to the Sharani."

Tagalong and Clemmerick, who knew what he was going to say, grinned.

Soren raised an eyebrow. "Going to finally announce that you're a battlemage? It's obvious from the armor and weapons."

"My name is Dynarien Willodarusson. I am the Rose Warrior. Twice-Born Son of Willodarus and I'm here to beat the shit out those assholes."

A murmur of "Yuwenghau" ran through the Sharani ranks and then a cheer.

"Laurelyanne," Aejs said, "Carliff told me that he had an artifact that allowed the undead in his valley to go about in the daylight. Do you think its influence extends to this valley?"

"No. It was probably intended to allow him to protect his people at all hours."

"And all you mages and Dynarien. Another consideration. What are the odds that the vampires and undead in this city are all royalty? Able to brave the sunlight?"

"Remote." Dynarien replied. "They hoard their blood."

"We torch the city," Aejs said, "And we enter at dawn. I want fire runs, Kalestari, as well as wall crushers. Alert the fireborn and the Regent. Skelly, Clemmerick, go forward at dawn and take the gates down at my signal. Let's get some rest."

Aejys went to the healer's wagon and climbed into the back. Josiah was sleeping, but he opened his eyes when she sat down.

"I should not have given in to you," Aejs told him, wagging her finger in his face. "Look how tired you are. And the fever came back."

Josiah grabbed her finger and nibbled it. "I love you."

"You don't fight fair. I can't argue with that."

"I love you." He licked her palm.

"Keep that up and I'll have to ask the healer if I can move you to my bed for the night."

"If you'll do all the work."

"That can be arranged. If you don't mind a face full of feathers."

"I don't mind."

\* \* \* \*

Hoon rode back from the city walls to the castle at the city's heart, accompanied by Mephistis, his general, and an assortment of liches, vampires, and sa'necari. He gestured to his general, a tall vampire who was of both his blood and his loins. "You know my mind and my heart, Timon. I am placing complete freedom to act in your hands. Do what you must to protect my city, but especially the keep. I am not the military mon in the family. You are. There are forces at work here I know nothing of. Aejs Rowan is not stupid. I will withdraw for a few days to the Chambers of Rite and Pleasure in the west tower to let my mind relax and roam. Have the seneschal send up enough nibari and full meals to tide me over for a few days. Except for direst emergency I do not wish to be disturbed while I discern a method to make an easy meal of our uninvited guests."

\* \* \* \*

The great birds spread their magenta wings, the delicate tracery of gold catching the morning light, and took off in a broad sweep across the sky, circling. The dark claret of their bodies gave way to azure bellies. Sparks danced along the edges of their feathers, streaming as they flew faster, becoming cataracts of flame as they came low along the battlements. The defenders of Hoon's walls cried out in fear and then despair. For the first time in centuries, with the exception of Kalestari, the fireborn flew to war beyond the borders of their own land. Flames engulfed the soldiers on the battlements. Those who managed to flee to the city below fared no better, for the next pass fired the buildings.

Aejys listened impassively to the screams coming from the city, nodded at Clemmerick and Skelly. She pressed her knees and ankles to her horse, riding behind the huge pair as they attacked the gates. Her mouth was a fine destrier, but the last time she had besieged a city, it had been on her on wynderjyn, Gwyndar. Gods, how she missed that big animal. Margren and Mephistis had cost her nearly everyone and everything she had loved. They were both in there somewhere. When she found them, she would destroy them.

Clemmerick stood aside, his tree club on his shoulder as the dragon seized the portcullis and worried it back and forth with a creak of stressing steel. Clemmerick bent and stared up under the top of the arch, consulted with Skelly. The dragon took hold and danced back with a twist, throwing all his weight and some momentum into it. The portcullis tore free. With a toothy dragonish grin, Skelly sailed the portcullis into the middle of Hoon's city. Then he stepped back, making an expansive gesture for Clemmerick to proceed. The ogre bent his knees, bounced for a moment to get his center, and stepped into the blow as he swung. The gates splintered. A cheer went up behind him. Skelly dragged the rest of the shards of gate aside and Aejys led the army into what had once been the city of Sweetwillow in the Valley of Errilyn. They could hear the thud of fireborn dropping wall crushers, boulders and trees, on the Regent's side of the city, since she had nothing to equal Skelly and Clemmerick.

The houses burned around them like dry kindling. Either there had not been many soldiers on the walls or the fireborn had gotten them all or the survivors had fled back into the keep because Aejys met with no armed resistance. What bothered her was no citizenry, either living or undead. The only sound was the crackling of flames as the city burned.

\* \* \* \*

Laurelyanne's eyes stung. She carried her staff in the lance cup of her saddle, leaning it the crook of her elbow so she could hold her reins in that hand while she wiped a hand across her tearing eyes.

"If it's the smoke, I can help," Dynarien told her.

She shook her head and he could see her mouth was drawn tight.

"It's the city?"

Laurelyanne nodded. "I'd forgotten about it. When you're as old as I am. When you've as many new hurts accumulated, you tend to forget to remember the older ones—or maybe they seem not to hurt as much in contrast. I forgot to think about it. After all I was just a child. Now I'm an old woman. Whatever happens, I don't ever want to come here again. I don't want to remember. I don't want to live in the past."

"I understand. It was four millennia before I fell in love again."

"You're in love?" Laurelyanne managed a smile.

"Yes." Dynarien grinned. "She's wonderful."

"Good for you!"

\* \* \* \*

"I don't like this, wielder," Skelly remarked, stalking at her side. They had left Jumpfree behind with the auxiliaries and a small guard at their camp in case things went wrong. Aejys prayed that whatever had been housed in the city was not right then striking at the camp.

"This was probably manned by that skeleton army your friend Firefinder destroyed," Clemmerick pointed out.

"That's a possibility," Aejys agreed.

"Still, it makes me uneasy," Skelly said again. "I stood beside Emanra in the final collapse of Galeador. It was like this."

\* \* \* \*

"Margren, please. Don't go out in the garden today," Mephistis pleaded, drawing her into his arms. "I have a bad feeling about all of this. Your sister isn't stupid. Neither is the Regent. They would not have come here if they didn't have a plan in mind. They know this is a city of the dead."

Margren twisted out of his hands and rolled off the bed, swishing to the wardrobe and shoving her gowns around in irritated movements. "Don't mention my sister. I'll go to the gardens if I want to. Hoon says they can't get into the city. His sa'necari and liches are already preparing a strike at them, just for the pleasure of it. All those idiots have done is bring us twelve thousand full meals."

"Beloved, please. Aejys was not the most brilliant of the five generals during the war – but she is the best still living. She is daring and resourceful and dangerous. And I

fear for you."

"I said shut up about my sister."

Mephistis felt the crush of fear in his chest; his mouth and throat go dry. He licked his lips, rising from the bed to capture Margren's arms. "Please, Margren, stay inside where I can protect you."

"No!" Margren hissed in his face. "I have an assignation in the garden. His member is long and hard and wide. His blood is warm and sweet and bountiful. He lets me take him in the throat. Now get out of my way while I dress! I am tired of you, Mephistis. You bore me. I don't even like the taste of your blood any more."

"Hoon! You're seeing Hoon in the garden."

Margren laughed. "Hoon has begun to bore me. I've spent days thinking about the way Hoon looked at Aejs. I watched you both working so hard to kill Aejs. The way you both hungered for her. The way your eyes looked as she climbed the mountain. You're both obsessed with her. You both want to possess her. I'm just a sop. A make-do. A substitute for the real thing. Get out of here!" She whirled, knocking him across the room, then picked up a chair and threw it at him. Mephistis fled.

\* \* \* \*

Timon stood on the tower parapet, watching Aejs' troops ride through the burning city. The lesser bloods huddled in the warrens of the sewers and tunnels beneath the city and castle. The fires could not reach them. If he could hold Aejs until nightfall then he could give her a serious contest. The Regent's troops had not yet breeched the south walls. They were not fighting this like any siege he had ever seen before. There were no scaling ladders, no battering rams, and no siege engines. Just those incessant hammering flights of fireborn. He needed to concentrate on Aejs Rowan who was actually inside his city. Timon dared not allow her to reach the walls of the keep. The remaining undead who could go out in the daylight were dependant upon the sa'necari who had raised them. If Rowan destroyed the sa'necari, she destroyed their undead in a single blow.

He chose a small flag from a basket at his side and waved it. A sa'necari on the outer walls of the bailey nodded, lifted his hands, and spoke.

\* \* \* \*

The stench of rotted flesh hit them an instant before the creatures erupted from the sewers all around them. Aejs and the front line were standing practically on top of one of the sewer entrances. Tagalong's pony went down and the dwarf was thrown, zombies swarming over her. Aejs sprang from her mount, leaving the panicked beast to kick and bite amid the stinking press. She did not need to strike a destroying

blow against the undead; the merest glancing touch of Spiritdancer shriveled the desecrated corpses of these lesser dead.

"Tag!"

Aejys ripped through the undead, reaching the unmoving dwarf, shouldering her. She had no time to see if her friend still lived or not. She could only hold her and fight on. Nearby she glimpsed Clemmerick stomping zombies into unmoving pools of jellied flesh. Skelly ground the dead with his hind feet while tearing them in half with his fore claws.

\* \* \* \*

The guard around the mages held firm. Dynarien dismounted, gesturing for the mages to do likewise. Soon he had them circled.

"They're coming out of the sewers. If we could close the sewers, we could stop anymore from coming up."

Laurelyanne shook her head. "Nothing grows here. They've killed all the grass and trees. There's nothing for us to work with."

Dynarien summoned his backpack and when one of the mages blinked, he explained, "What's mine comes to me. I summon things, my sister summons people." He knelt and dug through the pack, coming out with a strange brown nut. "It doesn't really like this climate, but I can coax it with a little help."

"What is it?" one of the fireborn mages asked.

"It's a banyan tree. It's sacred to my grandsire." Dynarien dug a hole in the ground with his hands, put the nut in, and covered it. He took a skin of water from his pack and watered the nut. "Link with me, focus on the tree and fill the city, collapse the sewers with the roots."

"Fill the city with a single tree?" Laurelyanne asked, skeptically.

"Trust me," Dynarien smiled. "This tree is a forest."

Their awareness centered on the sleeping seed, warm energy tickled it, sang to it. Life stirred and shifted, woke and stretched. Roots spread into the soil, stained and fed to richness with the flesh and blood of the city's countless murdered innocents over five centuries of terror. As death comes from life, life comes from death. The tiny quiescent womb within the seed grew green and stirred more strongly.

"Father," Dynarien murmured, reaching for his parent with his spirit, "grant us your blessed strength to kindle this small seed from the sacred tree in your garden in Imralon."

\* \* \* \*

Sitting cross-legged in his garden in Imralon, his back to the central trunk of his favorite banyan tree, Willodarus lifted his shaggy head from his contemplations. He drew his rooted hands from the soil, fingers forming slowly. A columned marble path lined the garden and crossed it in the patterns of his rune, which was almost lost in the forest of a single linked banyan tree.

"Dynarien," he whispered, his voice like the rustling of leaves in a soft breeze stirring on a summer's night. His son-grandson rarely called to him unless the need was both dire and affecting more lives than just Dynarien's own: the young one was proud in his way. Green light spread through the garden and the trees sang.

\* \* \* \*

*Power.* Vibrant green light enveloped the mages, shimmering in a spreading aurora in all the shades of life and growth, peace and joy. The soil sang with memories, answering at first with a cry of terror, the most recent memories emerging first; the years of terror under Hoon's reign; the slow fading of life as more deaths than births occurred until only a small herd of the vampire's conquered human cattle remained. Then joy and sweetness as the older memories stirred: children laughing; people talking; young folks dancing, flirting, teasing; fairs and markets. The earth remembered and found its power. Power joined to power. One mage laughed and another wept. It danced through them. They became not wielders of power, but vessels of the divine and rejoiced.

The ground shook beneath their feet and throughout the city, but they did not feel it, for they were centered in ecstasy. The tree erupted from the soil into a hundred years growth in seconds. The branches spread, descended to the ground, and became trees in their own right that sent out branches that became more trees. The fires, that had been burning in the city died, before the miraculous smothering growth. Warriors and horses struggled to keep their footing as the ground shifted and churned about them. Wonder spread over them with the trees. The undead faltered. The ha'taren shouted that the gods had given them a sign, rallying all around them. The warriors and soldiers, Valdren and Sharani, at one moment hard beset, now drew together with grim determination. A paean to Willodarus began among the rangers and the ha'taren added one to Aroana. The undead perished, falling like grain before the scythe.

The ground continued to heave and shake as the roots crushed the sewers and tunnels. A single tree became a forest. In the end, the only thing preventing the houses and streets from following the sewers and tunnels into destruction was that the city now sat upon a massive network of magical roots and nothing dark or evil could pass that barrier.

\* \* \* \*

Aejys cradled Tagalong, stroking the unruly crimson hair away from her face. Intermittently crying and cursing. Tagalong had not regained consciousness and the healers were worried. The dwarf had taken a hard blow to the head when she fell. There were gashes and tears in her arms and legs. When the healers pulled the helm from her head, the left side was thick with blood and already swelling.

"Your orders, majesty?" Soren's formality was a polite way of telling her to master herself.

Aejys looked up at the gray-haired paladin. "What shape are we in, Soren?"

"Losses were light, considering. Mages are exhausted. Except for Lord Dynarien."

"Evacuate the wounded and the mages. Remove the dead before the bloody sa'necari can get at them. Tell Skelly to rip the gates off. We're attacking again."

"Shouldn't we wait for the Regent? South wall is nearly down."

"No. Get the fireborn flying wall crushers. Not on the walls. I want to knock the fucking towers down. No fire because of the forest. However, if they would like to land on the walls and peck some sa'necari to death, that's fine with me." Her tone was hollow. "I'm going to destroy Margren and it's going to be today. Go on. Give me another minute alone with her and I'll join you."

"Majesty," the healer came up, "the sooner we move her to camp, the sooner we can help her."

Aejys desperately did not want to let go of Tagalong, but the healer was right. Tears rolled down her face as she let them take the dwarf from her arms. It all had happened so fast. Tagalong had not even had time to defend herself. Then Aejys rose, walking to the front of the column as they prepared to resume the assault.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm going to have my revenge," Margren growled, nestling tightly against the troll. "Hoon, Mephistis, my sister... I'll eat every one of them."

Juqwanch ran his huge hands up and down Margren's nude body, savoring the lines of her. He had been her favorite nibblet for months now, but never expected to actually have her until this moment. It was his blood that Hoon periodically drained off to make the Sanguine Rose that kept Mephistis alive. "I adore you, Margren. I'll help you kill them. Can I come inside again?"

"Can I drink again?"

They laughed and did so.

\* \* \* \*

Timon could not assess how much damage his attack had done to her forces because the entire city was now enveloped in this strange forest. However, with those trees collapsing the tunnels and sewers, he had to have lost nearly all of his army of lesser bloods, revenants, zombies, and ghouls. He now had just his royals, house guards, a unit of trolls, his sa'necari, and liches. He gestured to one of his aides.

"Go down to the tunnels beneath the keep and assess the damage to our forces there."

He gestured to another aide. "Go tell my father we've lost."

If he maneuvered the sword-fodder properly it would buy the royals and other elite cadres such as the liches and sa'necari time to escape and regroup on one of his father's other holdings.

\* \* \* \*

Hoon ran his lips along the arm of a nibari he had not tasted in awhile. She was a lovely little black-skinned thing with a tight cap of dark curls. She had cost him a small fortune and then a great expense to sneak across the borders. Hoon had forbidden his vampires to scar her – they had to close the wounds as soon as they finished feeding. She had a name, but he had forgotten it. Hoon licked his way up her shoulder and nuzzled her neck. She sighed. It was a nice sound. He licked at the artery in her throat to bring it fully to the surface so that he would not have to hurt her as much by going in too deeply. His fangs broke the skin and he drank. She settled against him, her head resting on his chest. She smelled nice. The blood tasted good. Hoon lost himself in reverie. Then he felt her heart falter and stop. He cursed himself for not staying aware of her. She had been such a docile toy that she did not even complain when she knew herself to be dying.

The castle shook. Mephistis staggered in. "The castle is under attack from the south and north. We can't hold."

"How could they have gotten catapults and siege engines through the gorge without my knowing it?" Hoon demanded.

"It's not catapults," Mephistis said. "It's three wings of fireborn and a dragon."

The castle shuddered. Bottles flew off the walls. Some of them shattered. Hoon pulled a piece of paper from a drawer, scribbling hastily. "Flee. If you go south, you will find me here. In Minnoras. If you go north, make your way to Creeya, and find Gylorean Galee."

"Galee?" Mephistis took the paper as Hoon shoved it at him. Galee was a name spoken of in whispers among the innermost ranks of the sa'necari and never mentioned outside them. "The mentor of Waejonan lives?"

Hoon allowed himself a full smile, all fangs and white teeth. "Yes. Although I would use a different word for the undead. Now, get out of here!"

Mephistis fled.

The castle shook again. Hoon took a large crystal globe from another drawer, gesturing at the room. A small whirlwind swept around him, gathering the bottles and magical instruments, including the desk. Everything dwindled in size and was drawn into the crystal. Hoon stood for a moment in the now empty chamber, thinking and then opened his mind. His awareness reached his vampires, liches, and sa'necari.

*<Flee! Regroup in Minnoras or Creeya as you choose . >*

His mind voice was very limited, but the others would pick it up and resend it until all had heard. Hoon descended the stairs. The central rooms were in chaos: people and creatures screaming and crowding the doors, trying to find somewhere to flee to. Hoon paused at a window and stared out at what had been his north gate. A quetzalcoatlys – ridden by what looked, at first glance, like a Jesmyrran in full armor – held the pieces of the gates, which it had ripped from its hinges, in his claws as it burst into the ranks of the living and dead defending the outer courtyard. Hoon stared more closely at the figure on the dragon and cursed. The coloring and wings were new, but he would never forget the face: Aeijstrys Rowan had come.

"Damn you! I'll see you turned or dead." Hoon shoved the crystal inside his shirt and changed. He flew out the window, heading south.

\* \* \* \*

Aejys' mount had died in first skirmish and, rather than deal with another unfamiliar with her wings, she mounted Skelly instead. She rode easily on his shoulders as he seized the gates, ripping them from the hinges. Then Skelly spread his wings and went over the wall, allowing the cavalry to charge through beneath him. The dragon landed in the midst of a knot of guardsmyn and others who never expected the walls to fall so easily. Aeijys cut and parried, thrust and slashed, taking down every thing in her path without pausing; the dragon stalking along at her back, cleaning up anyone who tried to flank her. She scarcely heard the battle join behind them. The King of Rowanhart stepped aside long enough for Skelly to tear open the doors of the castle and they entered the vaulted chamber. Aeijys shouted her sister's name as a battle cry, demanding she show herself and fight.

Four stone trolls charged them from a hallway and, as Aeijys turned to engage them, Clemmerick came suddenly to her side, wielding his great club.

"Keep going!" he shouted, "Find the bitch!"

Aejys gave him a nod and went on. Whether it was intuition, or a new sprung link with her hated sister, or some subtle communion with the blade, Aejys felt a pull toward a far door that opened near the dais and went in that direction.

\* \* \* \*

"Four against one? Doesn't seem fair," said a male tenor. A sword whispered from the sheath. The scent of roses swept through the chamber on a private breeze gone public. The trolls hesitated, smelling the stench of divinity.

Clemmerick glanced from the corner of his eyes at Dynarien. "Which two do you want?"

"Those two, I think," Dynarien grinned. He could hear the clatter of hooves as the ha'taren rode their wynderjyn through the shattered doors and into the chamber, engaging the ranks of the undead swarming out of rooms and corridors to confront them. The horns of the wynderjyn, though not as long as their unicorn sires, were sharp and deadly – what their horns did not get, their teeth and hooves did. The blades of the ha'taren – paladins of Aroana – who rode the wynderjyn were even more deadly than their steeds.

Clemmerick advanced upon the trolls grinning. The nearest one sprang at him. The ogre's club swung, catching the creature in the chest and hurling him across the chamber to crash into the throne, overturning it. The second grappled with Clemmerick, forcing his arms up and sinking its teeth into his shoulder. Clemmerick roared, twisting his arms free and connecting the butt of his club with the creature's jaw, shattering it. The troll let go, shaking its head like a stunned dog, as the second returned. Clemmerick staggered back, his shoulder bleeding and throbbing. He braced his feet to swing, bringing the club down as the troll reached him. It dodged with surprising quickness for a creature of its size, to tear at the ogre's leg. Clemmerick cried out in pain and rage, his leg gave and he went down on one knee, hammering the butt of his club into troll's head repeatedly until he drove it deep into its brain. The first troll dug one clawed fist into the ogre's wounded shoulder and the other into the wound on his leg, and then bit into his side. Clemmerick fell, darkness gathering in his mind. The troll gnawed on the fallen ogre hungrily. A tiny figure climbed out of his pocket where he had hidden, as he often did in battles. Grymlyken walked unnoticed across the ogre's prone figure and shoved his small blade into the troll's eye, all the way into its brain, before the troll even knew the pixie was there. From that day forward the tiny pixie would be known as Grymlyken Trollbane.

Grymlyken left his sword there, dropped to the ground and went to Clemmerick's face, throwing himself across his cheek, tangling his hands in the ogre's dark hair while he wept and babbled meaningless noises meant to be reassuring. The

grievously wounded ogre was too much for him to help. "Just hold on, Clemmerick, just hold on."

\* \* \* \*

Dynarien laughed at the two trolls he had singled out. "Hey you two ugly beasts. It's no wonder you can't get a female without putting a sack over your heads!"

"Stupid creature!" One of the trolls nodded at the other and they charged him together. Dynarien brought his shield up as the nearest one struck at him. The shield glowed blue at the tremendous impact, dispersing it as if it had never been, and the yuwenghau leaped high over the troll's arm, his golden sword flashing. The troll screamed as the blade severed its arm.

Dynarien moved away from them, smiling. "You'll have to do better than that. Come on, you big ugly cockwhores! Been feeding the fang-uglies too often?" he taunted. The wounds on the troll were already closing, but it would take weeks to grow a new arm. They came for him more warily. Dance and lunge and dance again. He cut them each twice more. The wounded one came in fast and Dynarien got the blade into its ribs, but missed the heart. It surged up the blade like a wounded boar, all fury and no thought, until the crosspiece pressed its chest and it dragged him to its jaws. It bit for Dynarien's neck, but got his shoulder, the teeth crushing the matchless links and the bone beneath, prying the links apart to reach the pale flesh. Blood oozed forth. His shield arm hung limp and useless. The second one seized him around the chest, squeezing. He released the sword, raised his hand high, and summoned it from the troll's body. He drew the blade down like a razor. The miraculous sword severed the troll's neck, leaving its head, teeth still tightly locked, hanging from his shoulder. The second troll was slowly crushing his ribs. It hurt to breathe, fire laced every breath. He forced the sword down, pulling it between the troll's hands and his body. Only his armor kept him from cutting himself. He sliced his surcoat away as he cut through one of the troll's hands and was finally able to break free. Dynarien staggered forward and turned.

"Shall we dance?" he laughed raggedly through the pain. The troll stared for a moment at its companion's head and in that instant the yuwenghau shoved the golden sword through its heart. "I guess I'm not going to Talons' aid as soon as I thought I was," he said, collapsing across the dead troll.

\* \* \* \*

Margren huddled in the bower of ornamental bushes where she had been trysting with her troll. Only that morning, Hoon had sworn to her that the walls would hold, that Aejys had brought no siege engines. She heard the heavy boom of missiles striking stones and mortar, the shuddering roar of collapsing walls and roofs. Margren scrambled into her clothes, emerging from the sheltering arms of her troll to peer outside their bower. She saw the fireborn coming in rank after rank.

Margren stepped into a panicked crowd. Screams came from the courtiers and nibblets surrounding her. She shoved them aside, knocking several down. Her troll followed her closely. She sprang over a bench and into the bushes, glancing down at herself. She had never gone armed in this place as she had in Shaurone. Weapons. She needed weapons – a sword. There were several guards gathering near the garden's north gate.

"Give me your sword!" she demanded of the nearest one.

The mon hesitated and she seized his throat in a crushing grip.

"Give me your sword!"

The guard gurgled and went still. The other guards drew away from her, staring.

Margren dropped the dead guard and began tearing his weapons off, buckling on his sword and dagger. If there had been time, she would have taken the armor too. She wore only a gossamer robe, more suited to the games she played than to a battle. She heard her sister shout her name and turned to see a winged figure stalk into the garden followed by a dragon. The guardsmyn engaged the pair and were cut down.

Aejys pitched her voice like a battle cry. "MARGREN!"

Margren stepped into the open. "Sister."

Aejys lunged, the sword sang as it weaved a deadly pattern. Then their blades met and danced.

Margren retreated, parried, and retreated again. She could find no opening in her sister's attack. She gathered her power and threw a sizzling bolt from her mind at Aejys. The sword came up as if in salute, turning the energy back on her. Margren screamed. Then Aejys attacked again. Margren retreated, her shoulder bumped a tree, and she stumbled. The troll emerged from the trees to the side of Aejys, and wrapped itself around her, pinioning her arms and wings. She screamed as images of Bucharsa and Dragonshead flashed through her. For an instant she could not act.

"Hold her while I kill her!" Margren snarled, driving the blade with all her tremendous undead strength.

Skelly grabbed the troll, dragging it and Aejys sideways; turning what would have been a mortal wound into a potentially serious one as the blade tore through the links of her chain to leave a gash in her side. Aejys felt the troll's grip come loose in the same instant as the impact and staggered, going to her knees. Pieces of the chain mail had been twisted and driven into her flesh. It hurt and burned. Awareness grayed. She shoved past it, watching Margren as she rose to her feet again.

"You never were one to fight fair."

Margren sucked a scream down, glancing from Skelly methodically tearing her troll to pieces to Aeijys regarding her with knit brows and slowly shaking her head. Margren's eyes grew large and she backed away. A wound like that should have laid her out, but she seemed almost unfazed. Aeijys stalked toward Margren, limping slightly, and Margren retreated again. Although Margren still carried the sword limp-wristedly, the fight had become an execution: Margren's.

"I'm not easy to kill, Margren."

"What are you?"

"I don't know," Aeijys said, in a soft, dispassionate tone, all the while stalking her sister through the garden. "Maybe no one does. But I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to destroy you."

Margren threw the sword down, spinning to run in full flight, but not quickly enough. The Spiritdancer plunged through her undead heart. Margren shuddered, her mouth opened and a long billowing white vapor flowed out. Figures formed briefly in the vapor and vanished. All the souls she had taken, all the power and lives, escaped.

Aeijys kicked her off the blade and beheaded her. Margren's corpse withered, the flesh peeled away and soon only her bones remained. Aeijys gazed down at her. She had expected to feel triumphant, but instead there was only a hollow emptiness in the pit of her stomach. This debt was paid, but the price had nearly been her soul and the lives of her friends. Carliff's words echoed in her mind, demanding atonement for her sins – her mistakes and wrong choices that had cost so many lives, and might still cost lives. Tagalong lay grievously wounded and she did not yet know who else might have fallen in this battle. She was now what she had once claimed in Vorgensburg: merely a soldier and not a paladin of any god. Like Carliff, she craved atonement and forgiveness – and she doubted she would ever have it, even from herself.

Aeijys wiped her blade, sheathed it, and sat down, leaning against a tree. Her side hurt; she felt around it, wincing at the thought of the healers having to dig some of the twisted links out; but the bleeding had stopped. Thanks be to Skelly, it looked worse than it was. She took out her pipe, filled and lit it, and then sat smoking while Valdren and Sharani moved all around her. Skelly was happily popping the tops off towers and pulling people out. He sniffed each one, and some he released and others he bit in half, spitting out the pieces.

A fireborn landed and dwindled to the size of a large dog before approaching. Aeijys threw her arms around the fireborn's neck. "Kalestari, my friend, I wish I could have restored the missing piece of your soul."

"When Mephistis dies by the Dancer's blade, I will be whole again."

"I will try to make it so."

"I heard about Tag. I'll take you to camp if you wish."

Aejys sucked down a fortifying breath, her face tightening. "Thanks."

"Sorry to interrupt, Lord Aejys," Soren said. The grizzled paladin's surcoat and armor were splattered with blood. She paused to wipe her sword on the grass and then sheathed it. "The Regent's troops have breeched the south gate. The citadel has fallen. So far, no one has found either Hoon or Mephistis."

"Margren is destroyed."

The paladin's mouth tightened. "Then Ladonys and Laeoli are avenged." She turned away and, after a moment, walked off.

Aejys watched Soren leave. "No," she said softly, "so long as Mephistis lives, they are not avenged."

## EPILOGUE

Aejys wore a loose, unbelted tunic, Spiritdancer hanging at her shoulder. She had refused to let the healers tend her injuries until all of her myn had been taken care of. Grymlyken had been a bundle of hysteria by the time they could get Clemmerick moved from the castle to the camp beyond the walls. One of the Valdren healers eventually sedated the little fellow just so they could pull him loose from his big friend long enough to tend the ogre's injuries. They had spent an hour trying to pry the dead troll's head off Dynarien's shoulder; and finally resorted to knocking it into pieces with a hammer and then digging the shards out of the armor and the flesh beneath. Both Clemmerick and Dynarien were recovering. It was Tagalong who had everyone worried.

Aejys sat in the small tent with Tagalong. One side of her friend's head was shaved and bandaged where they had trepanned the injury. The healer stood for a moment more, watching them.

"Majesty, if she doesn't wake soon, she isn't going to."

"I understand."

"I'll have someone outside waiting to sit with her when you leave." The healer departed.

"Damn it Tag, you didn't even get a blow in. All you did was fall off a pony. You're

supposed to be tougher than this. I always said you had a hard head. Are you going to make me out a liar? If you don't wake up..."

"What if I ... don't want to?"

"Tag!"

"Stupid puddin' head paladin ... my head hurts ... an' yer screamin' at me."

\* \* \* \*

"It's as well that Margren was destroyed," Hoon said, standing beside Timon in the shadows of his house in Danae, still too close to the borders of what had been his valley to suit him. The house would have to be sold. "She was unstable. Sooner or later I would have been forced to destroy her myself. That would have put me at odds with the prince. Mephistis is my hedge against Baaltrystan. The House of Waejonan may have forgotten our quarrel over the generations, but I have not."

"Nor have I, father. The prince is returning to Linden's. He will double back through Shaurone and meet us in Minnoras. I advised this."

Hoon nodded slowly, stroking his thumb across his lips. "You will advise our agents to withdraw all our assets from Shaurone. I will not come this way again. I fear the Sharani will finally close on all of us who linger within their reach."

"And what of Dynarien, Father. Did he recognize you?"

"No. I think not." Hoon brushed the hair back again from his ears. He had spent many centuries mastering ways to subtly alter his form. His skin turned fair and his rounded ears grew points. "It is best that no one knows Brandrahoon survives. Once there were three brothers, Brandrahoon, Isranon, and Waejonan. Now there is just one."

THE END

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